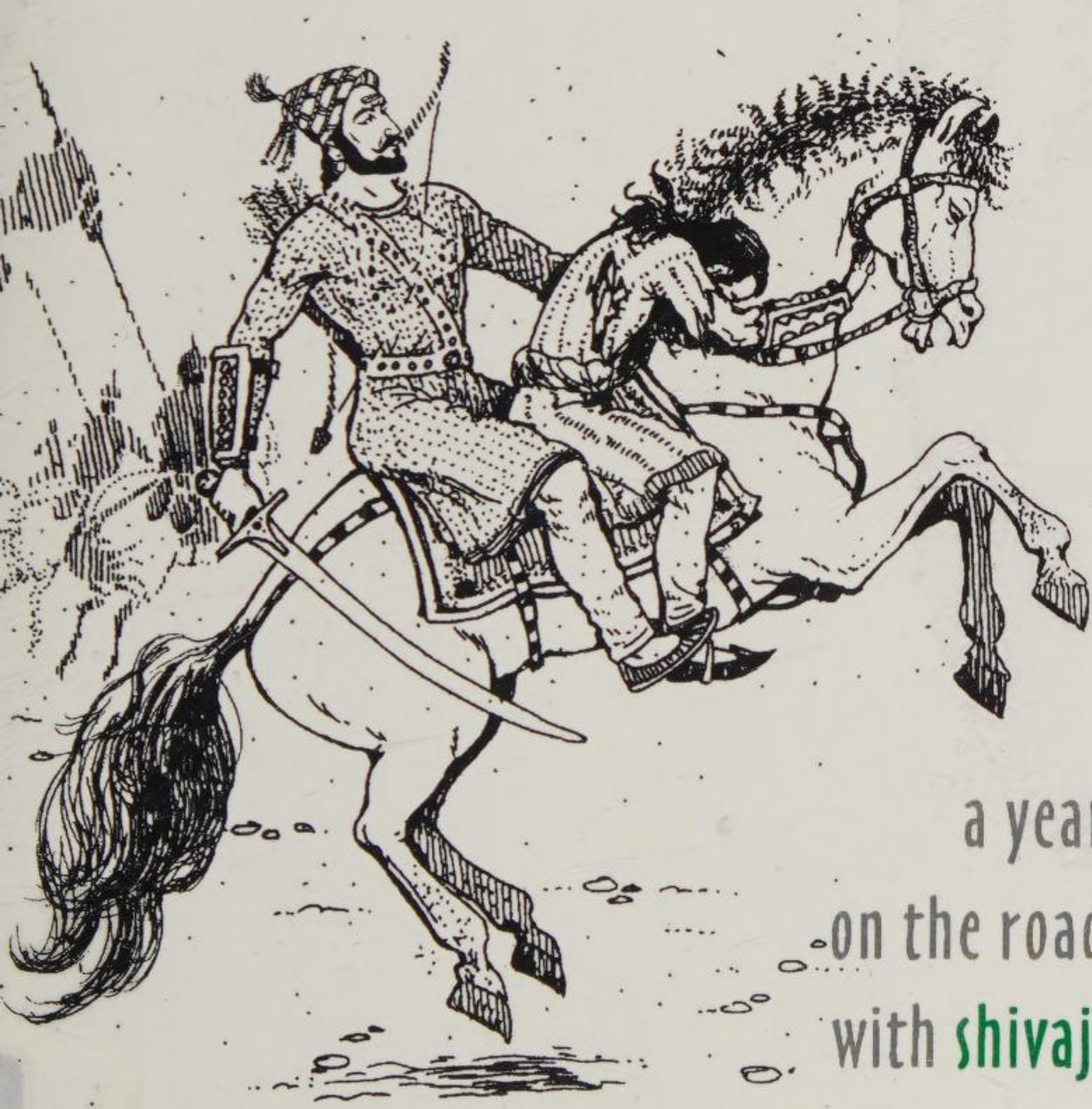
band of soldiers



a year on the road with shivaji

SARADINDU BANDYOPADHYAY

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Band of Soldiers

A Year on the Road with Shivaji

SARADINDU BANDYOPADHYAY

Translated by

SREEJATA GUHA

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For Bhuvana and Bhairav

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INTRODUCTION

These five stories are delightful adventure sequences set during the time of Shivaji Rao, or Chhatrapati Shivaji, as he came to be known later. This introduction is to give you an idea of the historic background against which these stories should be read.

In the fourteenth century, when Muhammad Tughluq was the emperor in Delhi, the kingdom of Vijayanagar was set up on the southern banks of the Tungabhadra river. It flourished undisturbed for a hundred years or so. After that, it faced repeated attacks from the neighbouring Bahmani kingdom, established by Abul Muzaffar Bahman Shah. In the first half of the sixteenth century, the Bahmani kingdom broke up into independent principalities or sultanates, like Khandesh, Golkonda, Bidar, Ahmadnagar and Bijapur. Each was ruled by a Muslim ruler, and between them, they controlled the whole of the Deccan.

There was constant strife between these principalities, and between them and the Mughal empire for the next century and half. As a result, the common man suffered at the hands of wayward soldiers and mercenaries, and also under insecure

rulers who collected vast amount of taxes to strengthen their armies and to protect their forts. The village folk were reduced to poverty.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Akbar, the Mughal emperor, waged wars against the Deccan states and annexed some of them. Bijapur, however, remained unvanquished. In 1623, Sultan Adil Shah of Bijapur had allied himself with the Mughals and Emperor Jahangir. This further alienated the sultans of Bidar and Golkonda.

After Shah Jahan ascended the throne in 1633, he conquered Ahmadnagar, ending the rule of the Nizam Shahi dynasty. The sultans of Bijapur and Golkonda tried to take over some of the border states during the chaos and confusion.

Shahji Bhonsle, a powerful nobleman of Ahmadnagar, set up a puppet Nizam Shahi monarch and governed a portion of the dominions in his name. He was encouraged and assisted by Adil Shah of Bijapur.

The Mughal assault on the sultanates continued. In 1636, Adil Shah of Bijapur had to come to a compromise with the Mughal empire. As a result of this, Shahji had to surrender his territories. He retained only a *jagir* near Poona, which he held as a vassal of Bijapur.

When Shah Jahan returned to Delhi, he left behind Aurangzeb as the viceroy of the Deccan. Aurangzeb's religious intolerance resulted in years of discontent and discrimination, and caused uprisings from the persecuted people. Perhaps the best known of these uprisings was that of the Marathas under Shivaji.

Shivaji was born in 1627 in the hill fort of Shivner, near Junnar. He was the son of Shahji Bhonsle and Jijabai. As a young man, Shivaji resolved to defeat the invaders—principally the Bijapuris and the Mughals—who had brought misery into his land.

Shivaji's first act to fulfil this goal was to seize Torna fort from Bijapur in 1646. His assaults against the Bijapur sultanate caused Shahji much discomfort and finally imprisonment. But Shivaji forged ahead relentlessly, and at the time of his death, his kingdom extended to Saurashtra in Gujarat and most of the Deccan.

These stories of fictionalized history are set in Maratha India in the mid-seventeenth century. The stories are told by Sadashiv, an orphan who is banished from his village. Sadashiv, like most boys of his times, wants to free his people from the misrule of the Bijapuris and the Mughals.

In my translation, I have tried to retain the charm and magic of the original. If I have succeeded, the credit goes to the venerable writer, and for my failure, I take the entire blame. As you begin this book, I wish Sadashiv a safe and pleasant journey into your heart and mind.

PART I

THE ESCAPE

CHAPTER ONE

Sadashiv knew he could not live in Dongarhpur for much longer. He was an orphan, and lived in his uncle's house, where he did not feel particularly welcome. And now everyone in the village was angry at him. And all because of the way he looked.

The people in the village muttered about Sadashiv, 'We are growing thinner by the day because there is no food. And that boy seems to be glowing with health. He must be stealing food from us!'

When Sadashiv protested, 'Never. Tell me, who have I stolen from?', they had no answer. But they still threatened him, 'The day we catch you at it, we'll skin you alive.'

For as long as they could remember, the people of the tiny Maharashtrian village tucked away in the Western Ghats had lived quite happily. It was a small farming community, and everyone had to work very hard, but at the end of the day, there had been enough food and peace and happiness in the village.

However, in the last few years, things had changed. For they had been caught in the struggle between two great empires: the Mughals of the north, who had occupied Daulatabad, and the ruler of Bijapur, Adil Shah. The war continued interminably. Soldiers from both sides looted their village, and took away the millet and cereals that the farmers had worked all year to grow. When mighty kings are at war, the biggest losers are the subjects. Now there was barely enough for the villagers to eat, and everyone grew hostile and suspicious.

To add to it all, there was a new problem on the horizon. A Maratha youth called Shivaji and his band of dacoits were going around the countryside, looting and ransacking. He didn't trouble the poor farmers, but he had his eyes set on the rich noblemen. People said that Shivaji was a very courageous man, and that he was not scared of either the Mughals or the Bijapuris. They said he wanted to oust the two Muslim kings and set up a Hindu kingdom in Maharashtra. But would Shivaji succeed? Was it possible for a mere dacoit to oust the mighty Mughals?

But for the people of the village, such larger issues really did not matter. They were concerned with their own lives, and that there was so little food that they were all reduced to skin and bones. And what troubled them was not whether the Mughals won or the Bijapuris won, or even whether Shivaji would manage to overthrow them. All they cared about was

food, and the mystery of how Sadashiv managed to look healthy. His uncle, Sakharam, was known to be a stingy man, who was not particularly fond of his nephew. No one believed that he would give his share of food to Sadashiv. Then the boy must clearly be stealing, though none of them could ever find any proof of that!

There was actually one person in the village who loved Sadashiv dearly. And it was she who ate only a quarter of her share of food and gave away the rest to him.

One summer evening, Sakharam summoned Sadashiv to the village meeting place under the banyan tree. There were four or five village elders present. He said, 'My dear Sadashiv, I can't feed you any more. You should fend for yourself now.'

The elders seemed to have discussed the matter earlier, for they nodded now as Sakharam spoke.

Sadashiv gawked in amazement. He had expected to be yelled at, not told *this*. 'If you don't give me food, what will I eat?' he asked.

Vithhal Patil, one of the elders, said, 'You are a young man now and you should earn your own living. How long will your uncle feed you?'

Sadashiv said, 'I am more than willing to work hard. Please give me some work to do.'

Another of the elders turned his hands up and said, 'Where is the work to give? Can't you see we are all sitting idle? For whom should we till the land? For the soldiers?'

Sadashiv said, 'Then please tell me what I should do.'

Vithhal Patil bared his teeth. 'How should we know that? No one in the village wants you around. You may leave tomorrow

and go wherever you wish.'

The world seemed to tilt for Sadashiv. He could feel his eyes prick with tears. He had never left the village in all his sixteen years, had never ever thought he would have to leave the village. What did he know of the world outside? He asked, 'Where shall I go?'

A third elder cackled with laughter. 'There's no problem in that! Go and join the Mughals. You're quite hale and hearty, not scrawny and emaciated like us. The Mughals would surely take you in.'

'You could also try the Bijapuri forces,' added another, maliciously.

'The best thing will be to join up with Shivaji's band of dacoits. Stealing is already a habit of yours,' said the second elder. 'In the band of dacoits, you'll be well respected.' The men laughed at their own wisecracks.

Sadashiv stood in silence for a while. Then he walked slowly to the riverbank at one end of the village and sat down. The little mountain stream, which the villagers proudly called a river, had almost dried up in the summer heat. The banks were heavy with bushes and shrubs. A lone jackfruit tree stood there like a ghost, its branches stripped bare of even unripe fruit. Sadashiv climbed on to a low branch, leaned against the trunk and began to think.

Though he sat until it was almost dark, no solution came to him. He would have to leave the place he had spent all his life in, and the future lay before him, completely unknown.

Sadashiv clambered down from the tree and picked up two pebbles from the riverbank. He placed the pebbles on a branch

of the tree. Only one person would understand the message—the placing of the pebbles meaning 'We will talk tonight', and the number indicating the time.

As Sadashiv headed back for the village, he saw that the women and girls of the village were coming to the river to fetch water. He didn't feel like meeting any of them, so he took another route towards the village.

In mountainous valleys, night falls early and farmers rise and sleep with the sun. Sadashiv got back home, ate the dried-up half of a millet roti that his aunt gave him, and went to sleep.

He was suddenly awake as the new moon was getting ready to rise in the eastern sky. He had this ability to wake at whatever time he wanted to. He rose silently and walked towards the river like a shadow.

It was dark beneath the jackfruit tree. But Sadashiv could see very well in the dark. A girl stood leaning against the lowest branch of the tree. It was Kumkum, the village elder Vithhal Patil's daughter.

Although Kumkum was thirteen or fourteen years old, she didn't look any older than ten or eleven. She was small, petite and pretty. She didn't say much, but she was very bright.

Sadashiv went up to her. He leaned against the trunk of the tree and they talked in whispers.

'Kunku, do you know everything?'

'I know. Here, eat this.'

Sadashiv took a mouthful of what she held out. It was *puranpuri*—sweet chapatti with lentil and jaggery inside. It was so long since he had puranpuri.

As he munched happily, he said, 'Now that I'm going away,

you'll be able to eat properly. Poor thing, giving me your share everyday has made you even thinner than you were.'

Kunku said, 'Hah, that's what you think. Can I help it if I can't eat more than a fourth of my share? Should I throw that food away? That's why I bring it for you.'

The moon had risen higher. The moonlight dodged the leaves of the tree and laid its cool fingers on their faces.

Sadashiv said, 'What will you do when I go away?'

Kunku didn't answer the question. She asked, 'Will you leave in the morning?'

Sadashiv said, 'Yes. The village elders have ordered me to leave. If I don't go on my own, they'll throw me out. I think I'll leave before dawn. In fact, I might as well leave now.'

Kunku said, 'Where will you go?'

Sadashiv chewed on the puranpuri for some time. Then he said, 'I don't know yet. Some say I should join the Mughals and some say I should go to the Bijapuris. What do you say?'

Kunku said, 'I say that you should go to Poona and join Shivaji. People call Shivaji a dacoit, but he isn't really one. He is fighting to oust the foreign enemies from the land. When he rules the land, peace and joy will return.'

Sadashiv was filled with enthusiasm at her words. 'You are right, Kunku! I will join Shivaji. It is because of the Mughals and the Bijapuris and their battles that we are starving here. I'll fight against them and drive them out.'

As he finished the puranpuri, Kunku handed him a bag. 'Take this,' she said. 'You'll need it on the way.'

Sadashiv didn't ask what was in the bag. He slung it over his shoulder and placed his hand on Kunku's shoulder. 'Kunku, I

have to go now. I won't go home, I'll head straight to Poona. We'll meet again.'

Kunku said, 'Goodbye! We'll meet again.'

Kunku stood and watched as Sadashiv set off in the bright moonlight.

To take the road to Poona, Sadashiv had to go through the village. It seemed quite dead—no one was awake at this hour. Sadashiv heaved a sigh. It was the only home he had ever known. Despite himself, tears welled up.

As he passed Kunku's house, Sadashiv noticed that Vithhal Patil's horse stood tied in the meadow by it. The horse looked worn and emaciated. In a village where people didn't get two square meals, who could feed a horse properly? In the heat of summer, the grass in the meadows had also dried up.

Sadashiv was filled with pity. Poor thing! The horse would soon die of starvation. Should he allow such a fine animal to die just like that? Instead—

He looked around cautiously. Everything was still. He tiptoed towards the horse, untied it and harnessed it. Then he took the reins and walked it out of the village.

Once he was outside the village, Sadashiv mounted the horse, turned it in the direction in which he had heard Poona lay, and galloped away.

CHAPTER TWO

There was no straight road that went from the village to Poona. One had to go through woods and over hills. Sadashiv knew that there were many wild animals in the woods and caves: packs of foxes, wolves, wild dogs and *tarash* or hyenas. But he did not see any of them. Perhaps they'd gone in other directions to hunt.

Slowly, the moon grew pale and the sun rose. As the sun rose higher, it grew hot. Although Sadashiv's horse was thin from lack of food, it was still a strong hill horse. It cantered on, sometimes uphill and sometimes downhill. The regular rise and fall felt as if the tumultuous waves of the ocean had suddenly

turned to stone. They passed no villages, nor did they meet any people.

As they he descended into a valley, Sadashiv noticed a spot on the dried-up bed of a mountain stream where some water remained. His horse must have seen it at the same time, so that it headed towards the water even before Sadashiv touched the reins.

It was a small pond surrounded by a green border of grass. Sadashiv dismounted, went to the pond, cupped water into his palms and drank. The horse also gulped down a great deal of water and then began to munch on the fresh grass.

A little farther away, a boulder rose up and made for a tiny spot of shade. Sadashiv sat in its shade and undid the bag that Kunku had given him.

There wasn't much in it: a few fistfuls of corn, a couple of thick millet rotis and a laddu made of moong dal which was as hard as a rock. Sadashiv gazed at the food and thought of Kunku. The food would easily last him two days. As he ate a handful of corn, he thought of what would be happening in the village now. There would be a great hullabaloo over the disappearance of Patil's horse. A smile appeared on Sadashiv's face.

After he had finished and drunk to his heart's content, and his horse was satisfied, they set off again.

At noon, they reached the top of a hill and Sadashiv reined in the horse to look around. From this vantage point, he could see how the searing heat of the summer sun made all the trees droop and turn brown. Far away, beyond many hills and valleys, he could make out the faint outline of the towers of a fort.

Sadashiv had no idea which fort it was. From what he had

learnt from the talk of people in the village, of many forts tucked away in the crevices of the mountains some belonged to the Bijapuris, some to the Mughals and some others were cunningly captured by Shivaji. Some were still independent. It wouldn't be safe to venture towards that fort without knowing who owned it. Besides, he didn't know the way to it. It was better to head straight, as far as he could see, in the hope that he would reach Poona.

Sadashiv rode on all through the day. When he felt hungry, he dipped into Kunku's bag and ate a bit as he rode.

Finally, as the sun was about to set, he came upon another valley. It was quite large and filled with trees. A narrow river wound its way through the centre of the valley.

'I must be quite close to Poona,' Sadashiv thought. 'They say it is one day's ride from the village.' He would spend the night in this valley, he decided, and urged the horse down into it.

As Sadashiv descended into the valley, he saw that there were the remains of what must have been a village. The ring of ashes on the riverbank was a witness to that; the villagers must have died in an enemy attack and those who survived must have escaped. The enemy had raided the village and set the huts on fire as they left.

Sadashiv rode up to the water's edge and dismounted. He took the reins off and left the horse loose. There was fresh grass growing by the water and the horse would feed on it, but wouldn't be able to wander too far away.

He sat upon a rock by the water and ate to his heart's content. By the time he had finished, there was only the moong laddu left in the bag. He saved that for the following day. There was

no telling when he'd reach human habitation, and he should leave something to eat.

After finishing his meal, Sadashiv went in search of a tree. It wasn't safe to sleep on the ground as there might be wolves and hyenas around. Spending the night on a tree was the safest option.

A little bit away from the river there was a huge wild berry tree, probably the biggest tree in the whole valley. The branches were laden with bunches of black berries and the ground beneath the tree was dark with ripe fruits that had dropped down.

Sadashiv climbed the tree and settled on a branch about fifteen feet above the ground. There was another branch close by to hold on to.

Daylight was fading, and Sadashiv was exhausted by his long day's ride. Very soon, he was asleep.

Sadashiv woke up quite suddenly. Voices!

He opened his eyes. The moon had risen. He looked down. There were two men standing beneath the tree. He couldn't see their faces, but they were dressed like soldiers and carried spears in their hand.

Sadashiv lay still and listened to their conversation.

One of them said, 'Come on, Mian, let's bury it under this tree.'

The second one said, 'Why this one? What's wrong with the other trees?'

They spoke in Marathi and so Sadashiv deduced that they were not from the Mughal army but were Muslim soldiers in the Bijapuri army.

The first man said, 'Don't you see? This is the biggest tree in this place. When we return to collect the loot, we won't have to go hunting for it. This tree will be easy to find.'

'That's true. Fine, then, let's start digging right here.'

The men began to dig with the points of their spears. It wasn't easy digging the rocky soil; when one of them grew tired, the other one continued. And as they dug, they spoke of all that had happened to them that night.

Sadashiv gathered that they were part of the fifty guards who were escorting the money collected from the revenue from one Bijapuri fort to another in two bullock carts. The two forts were about thirty miles apart. The gold and silver coins were always transferred secretly at night, under heavy guard, because they feared attacks from dacoits. They hoped to reach their destination by dawn.

The dacoits had come on horseback and the soldiers couldn't defeat them. Some of the guards died and many ran away. After the dacoits emptied one cart, they started on the second. But soon after, one of the dacoits was wounded, and his horse was killed. The guards thought he was probably the leader of the gang as the remaining dacoits had abandoned their attack and let hastily with the wounded man.

When the dacoits left, there were only eleven guards left of the original fifty. These eleven men hatched a plan. Since the dacoits had already looted one cart, these eleven men would divide the contents of the second cart among themselves. Then they would go to the Bijapuri court the following morning and say that the dacoits had looted both carts. No one would disbelieve them.

The second cart contained only gold coins. The eleven men divided the coins among themselves and each went his way. These two men had come to bury their share before they returned to the court. Later, when the time was right, they planned to return to this spot and collect their buried treasure.

Sadashiv heard the whole story as he sat upon the branch. He kept absolutely still; even the slightest movement could alert these men. If they caught him, they'd surely kill him.

The men finished digging a hole that was large enough for their bags of coins, buried them and covered the hole up with soil. Then they left, still talking of what they would do with the money.

One said, 'No more of this soldier's life for me. Now I'll open a shop with this money—a big shop—and sell perfumes and scents. Wouldn't that be nice?'

The other soldier said, 'Hey, Mian, quit those dreams. If you open a shop, tongues will wag. Instead, sit quietly in a corner of your home. You won't have to work for a living any more. I will collect my share and set off under the pretext of going for Haj and head straight for Delhi. Then, in a matter of days, you'll see I'm a nobleman. Subhanallah!'

Their voices faded into the distance, and finally could be heard no longer. Sadashiv kept his ears pricked for a long time. When there hadn't been a single sound from any direction for a while, he came down from the tree quietly.

It didn't take him long to dig up the loose earth upon the hole with his fingers. From the bottom of the hole, two bags emerged. Sadashiv had never seen gold coins before and stared at them with round eyes. After a while, he managed to count

his newfound treasure. There were four hundred gold coins in each bag!

Suddenly, in the silent darkness, Sadashiv heard the sound of hooves. Turning quickly, he saw that along the water's edge, about a hundred yards away, was a group of riders. They were not galloping in pursuit of anyone, but seemed to be trotting along on some journey.

Lightning fast, Sadashiv dropped the bags of gold coins into his own bag, tucked it securely into his waistband and then climbed up the tree again. In the darkness, he hoped that the riders would not have seen him.

CHAPTER THREE

As the group passed the tree, one of the men raised his hand and said, 'Wait!'

Everyone stopped right by the tree.

The rider said, 'What is that animal near the water?'

Another man spoke up, 'Jai Bhawani! It's a horse! What's a horse doing here?'

A third man said, 'There's no need to find out how it got here. Just bring it here. We need it.'

Two of the riders got off their horses and went towards the water.

Sadashiv could see everything from his perch on the tree.

From their conversation he could tell that these men were Marathas. Perhaps they were the same as the band of dacoits that looted the Bijapuri bullock carts.

'If they seize my horse, I will be in great trouble!' thought Sadashiv. 'How will I reach Poona and Shivaji!' He could keep still no longer. Even if they were dacoits, they had no right to steal his horse. Perhaps he could stop them . . .

He clambered down the tree swiftly.

The horsemen were amazed at his sudden appearance.

'Who on earth is this?!' asked one. Another raised his spear threateningly, 'What are you doing here?'

Sadashiv wasn't daunted. He said, 'I want to speak to your chief.'

He went and stood in front of the man the others pointed out. The man was quite young—hardly twenty or twenty-one years old. He was holding a wounded man before him on his horse. He was talking to this man and seemed not to notice Sadashiv's approach. 'Jessa, are you in pain?'

The wounded man said, 'Not one bit. Just put me upon a horse and I'll be able to ride back.'

Two men clattered up with Sadashiv's horse. They had taken the ropes off and harnessed the horse.

The sound made the chief look up. His eyes fell on Sadashiv. He asked, 'Who are you?'

'My name is Sadashiv. Why have you seized my horse?'

The chief said, 'Are you the owner of this horse? Where is your home?'

'My home is in Dongarhpur.'

'Dongarhpur! That is very far from here. Why did you come

so far away from your village?'

'I am going to meet Shivaji.'

The chief looked at Sadashiv suspiciously for a long moment. 'Is that so? Why do you want to meet him?'

'I want to fight under his leadership.'

The chief laughed. He said, 'Very well. We are also Shivaji's men. Why don't you come along with us?'

'I could do that. But what about my horse?'

'We need your horse for a while. You see, Jessa here has been wounded and his horse killed. That is why he is riding with me. If we get your horse, we could set him on its back. What do you say, will you lend us your horse? Once we reach the fort, you'll get your horse back.'

The chief's manner of speaking was so charming that it was impossible to say no to him.

Sadashiv said, 'How will *I* go then?'

The chief said, 'I'll pick you up on my horse. My horse is quite strong and it can carry the weight of two people.'

A few of the men helped to move Jessa from the chief's horse to Sadashiv's. Sadashiv then clambered on behind the chief. The band of horsemen began to move forward again.

As they rode on, Sadashiv noticed that except for the chief, all the other men had big bags hanging on either side of their saddles. The bags looked very heavy. It became very obvious to Sadashiv that these were the same people that had looted the Bijapuri treasures. They also had one wounded man in the group. Everything fell in place neatly.

In the dim moonlight, the horsemen went diagonally across the valley. Sadashiv noticed that they were not riding uphill

very often. These men seemed to know exactly how to find the secret roads from one valley into another so that they could travel without too much exertion.

The chief chatted with Sadashiv as they rode. 'Why did you leave your village?'

Sadashiv said, 'My uncle threw me out.' Then he described the state of the village.

The chief said, 'That is the state everywhere in the Maratha kingdom. Unless we can oust the Mughals, the situation will not improve.'

Sadashiv asked, 'Where did you go so late in the night?'

The chief said, 'Since you are on your way to join Shivaji, there's no harm in telling you: actually we went to loot the Bijapuri treasury's revenue.'

There was silence for a while after that. Sadashiv didn't tell him that he had a part of that loot—some gold coins—tucked in his waistband. What was the point of telling the chief? If he had to tell someone, he'd tell Shivaji himself.

Finally, Sadashiv asked, 'Where are you going now?'

The chief said, 'We are going to the Torna fort.'

'But Shivaji lives in Poona, doesn't he?'

'Now he is in the Torna fort.'

'Does the Torna fort belong to Shivaji?'

'Until a few days ago it belonged to the Bijapuris. Now it is Shivaji's.'

'Shivaji is very brave, isn't he?'

'In Shivaji's band, everyone is brave. When you join his group, you'll have to be brave too.'

Sadashiv said simply, 'I will be brave.'

By the time they reached the Torna fort, the eastern sky was tinged with colour. The fort was on a tall hillock and it had iron gates. Two of the riders knocked on the gates with the blunt end of their spears and said, 'Har Har Mahadeo!'

The gates swung open and the riders clattered in.

It was a large courtyard, surrounded by many rooms, kitchens and stables. Sadashiv looked around as the chief and a few other men helped the wounded man into one of the rooms. The men of the band dismounted and led the horses into the stables where a few men were massaging their horses.

There were many people bustling around. Some men drew water from the well, some chopped firewood, others sharpened their swords. The women sat together and worked the grindstone, grinding the millet. Everyone was busy.

Sadashiv's companions from the previous night came out of the stables, each of them carrying two sacks on their shoulders. They piled up the sacks in the centre of the courtyard.

An elderly man stepped out. 'Perhaps he is Shivaji's treasurer!' thought Sadashiv. He had huge, grey whiskers and a beard neatly brushed onto his cheeks and he wore a raised turban on his head. He shook out the silver coins from the bags onto the granite floor.

The treasurer counted the coins carefully and divided the pile into two. The horsemen stood around and looked as they bantered and joked among themselves. Sadashiv stood some way off and looked on.

After dividing the pile into two, the treasurer gathered one half into a basket and carried it to the treasury. That was Shivaji's share. Then he came out and started dividing the other half

among the men who had gone for the raid. The group had been of forty young man, and the treasurer divided the second pile into forty equal shares. Each of the men got one hundred and eighty *hones*, as the silver coins were called. Each hone was worth about four rupees. They left laughing and talking among themselves.

Sadashiv was bowled over. What a fun way of living! He was dying to join the gang.

A guard carrying a spear came up to him and said, 'Are you Sadashiv? Come, Shivaji wants to see you.'

Sadashiv went along with him. He wondered what Shivaji would be like! Would he accept Sadashiv? What would he do if he said, 'You are too young and you won't be able to fight . . .'?

Sadashiv was taken into a large room with sandstone walls, a granite floor and two narrow slits of windows. A man stood there at the centre of the room. As Sadashiv entered, he laughed and said, 'Come in, Sadashiv.'

Sadashiv's jaws dropped in surprise. The young chief, with whom he had just shared a horse, was none other than Shivaji! He was so young! How could such a young man be the stuff of so many legends?

He blurted out, '*You* are Shivaji!'

'You seem to be very surprised. Yes, I am Shivaji.'

Sadashiv said, 'You went for the looting yourself?'

Shivaji replied, 'Yes. I usually do my own work myself.'

'You were carrying a wounded man in your arms!'

'He is my childhood friend, Jessaji Kank. If he hadn't been injured, we'd have looted both the carts. But let that be. How old are you?'

Sadashiv said, 'Sixteen or seventeen.'

Shivaji said, 'Fine, you are old enough to fight battles. But where are your weapons? How will you fight without weapons?'

Sadashiv gaped in surprise, 'Weapons!'

Shivaji said, 'Yes. Swords, spears, a coat of mail—how will you fight without these?'

Sadashiv said dolefully, 'I don't have any of these things.'

Shivaji said, 'Those who come into my band to fight usually bring their own horse and weaponry. I still don't have the means to provide my men with horses and weapons. When I will have the power to do so, I will. You have a horse, but not the weapons. Now, what is to be done?'

Suddenly Sadashiv remembered. He had almost forgotten that he had gold coins tucked in his waistband. He jumped up and said, 'I have money—gold coins!' He took out the bags from his waistband and laid the heap of coins onto the floor before Shivaji, and said, 'Rao, here is my gift to you. Please accept me in your group.'

It was Shivaji's turn to stare in amazement. Finally, he asked, 'Where did you find so many gold coins?'

Sadashiv narrated the tale of how he came upon the gold coins.

Shivaji was delighted with the story. He clapped Sadashiv on his back and said, 'Well done! We looted silver coins and you went for gold. I see you are very bright too. I need men like you. You don't have to give me *all* the gold coins. But right now, I am in need of money. So I'll keep your money in my treasury. You'll get it back whenever you ask for it. For the moment, keep one gold coin with you, that'll cover the cost of all your

weapons. Do you know how to wield a sword?'

Sadashiv was dejected again. 'No.'

Shivaji said, 'That's not a problem. My barber, Jeeb Mahala, is the greatest swordsman in all of Maharashtra and he will teach you. Within a month you'll be able to sport a sword competently.'

Sadashiv asked eagerly, 'Rao, when will I go out with you to a battle?'

Shivaji smiled at Sadashiv's enthusiasm. He placed a hand on his shoulder and said, 'That's not going to be soon. The monsoons are almost here. We don't do anything during monsoon. Use these few months to prepare yourself. Then, on the day of Dushhera, we will go out. What do you say to that?'

'Yes, Rao.'

Shivaji called the treasurer and asked him to take the gold coins inside. He also called Jeeb Mahala, and said, 'Jeeba, I've found you an apprentice. Make him an expert in wielding a sword.'

PART II

THE BIG BLAST

CHAPTER ONE

Sadashiv spent his days very happily in the Torna fort that monsoon. He learnt swordplay from Jeeb Mahala and did several chores in the fort. Shivaji's mother, Jijabai, was very fond of him, and cooked for him and supervised his meals. There were many boys of his age in the fort. Sadashiv became friends with them. It was like living in a huge family. Everyone was ready to lay down their life for the others, everyone was eager to go to battle. They all waited impatiently for the three months of the monsoon to be over.

It does not rain very much in that part of Maharashtra. The monsoon clouds from the western sea get trapped in the

Sahyadri range and can't find their way far inland. The few clouds that wandered in gave a little bit of rain. However, it rains in the hills, so the mountain streams and rivers flow in a torrent. That was what made it inconvenient for soldiers to move around in such times. Hence, no one went to war during the monsoon season.

When Sadashiv looked into the distance from the terrace of the fort, the hills and valleys all around were tinged with green. Some hills had waterfalls plunging down. Sadashiv's eyes wandered from the mountains towards his village. There, in that direction, lay Dongarhpur! Kunku was there. What could she be doing now?

Gradually, the monsoon came to an end. The water in the rivers receded. Everyone was full of fervour. The traditional day for setting off for battle was Dushhera. On that day, everyone put tilak on one another's forehead, presented each other with leaves of the kanchan tree and wished them well; then they all shouted 'Har Har Mahadeo' and set out. Dushhera wasn't far off, just five days away.

That afternoon, the clouds in the sky had thinned and through the misty clouds the moist sunlight was streaming in. Jijabai and Shivaji were playing dice on the terrace. They placed bets as they played.

Jijabai said, 'Shibba, if you can defeat me, I'll make you *doodhi halwa*. But if you lose, you'll have to build me a new fort. I'll name it Raigarh.'

Shivaji said, 'Fine, come on. I love ash gourd halwa.'

The game began. Tanaji Malsare and Jessaji Kank, Shivaji's friends, sat beside them and watched the game.

Sadashiv was also present there. He brought his beloved sword along. It was the apple of his eye and he didn't let it out of his sight for a second. From time to time, he came to watch the game in progress and then went away to stroll along the parapet. Every now and then, he fished the sword out of its scabbard carefully and gave it a couple of twirls. He had picked up the techniques very well during these months and was getting impatient now. When would he go into a real battle?

Suddenly, Sadashiv spotted a horseman galloping at full speed towards the fort. He gazed at him steadily. It was a black horse, and the iron coat of mail on the rider glimmered in the sunlight.

Sadashiv cried out, 'Shibba Rao! A horseman is headed this way, dressed in a coat of mail.'

Shivaji jumped up and came and stood by the ramparts, as did his two friends.

Sadashiv pointed, 'There!'

Shivaji shaded his eyes from the glare with his hand and stared at the horseman for a while. The rider was still some way off and his face was not yet visible. Shivaji turned to Tanaji and asked, 'I think it's Ratnaji. What do you think, Tana?'

Tanaji also gazed at the rider and said, 'Hmm. Who else could it possibly be? There, he's waving to us; he has seen us. Yes, it *is* Ratnaji.'

They waved back from the ramparts of the fort. Shivaji said, 'Tana, you go along and bring Ratnaji up here. It must be an urgent message.'

Tanaji went downstairs. Jessaji continued to look outside and said, 'Beautiful horse! How did Ratnaji come by such a horse?'

Shivaji laughed and said, 'Must have stolen it.'

Jijabai called out, 'What are you looking at, Shibba?'

Shivaji went back to his mother and said, 'Ma, Ratnaji has come. There must be some important news.'

Jijabai rose. 'In that case, let me go and get Ratnaji something to eat. Are you all going to be here?'

'Yes, Ma.'

Jijabai went downstairs. Shivaji and Jessaji sat down on the terrace. Sadashiv sat behind them. Slowly, he asked, 'Shibba Rao, who is Ratnaji?'

As he put away the game-pieces, Shivaji said, 'Ratnaji is my spy. He is with the Bijapuri army in the guise of an infantry soldier.'

Sadashiv was thrilled. So, much more than mere swordsmanship was needed to liberate the country!

A little later, Tanaji came up with Ratnaji. Shivaji got up and embraced Ratnaji. The latter was about thirty years old, and sturdily built with a beard and moustache.

Jessaji embraced him and said, 'Ratna, where did you get such a horse?'

Ratnaji laughed and said, 'It belongs to the commander-in-chief, Liyaquat Khan. He has several such good horses. I was ordered to take them out for exercise every morning and evening. So this morning I mounted the best of the lot and came here!'

Everyone laughed. Then Shivaji grew serious and said, 'Now give us the real news.'

Ratnaji said, 'The real news is not good. Seven thousand soldiers of Bijapur are on their way to attack Torna fort. They

have come to know that you are here. They started about fifteen days ago and have decided they won't let you get out of the fort. They want to surround the fort and blow it into bits with their cannons. They have twenty cannons and a hundred barrels of gunpowder.'

At this news, all three friends began to look worried. After a pause, Shivaji looked up and asked, 'How far away are they now?'

Ratnaji said, 'In the morning they were about forty miles away. Since they have cannons with them, they are moving slowly; I reckon they'll be here by tomorrow afternoon. When we set off, no one knew where we were going, except for Liyaquat Khan and a few other select men. Last night there was a party in the commander's tent. Wine and meat was in plenty. I was on duty, guarding the tent. I overheard their conversation and came to know that they are coming here to lay siege on you in Torna fort. That's it, I left the camp early this morning before anyone woke up.'

Shivaji sank deep into thought again.

Sadashiv's heart sank. 'Seven thousand soldiers! Cannons and all! How will Shibba Rao get out of this one? How will the fort survive? O Mother Bhawani, please help me think of something, so that I can save Shivaji Maharaj,' he thought frantically.

A while later, Shivaji looked at his friends and said, 'What do you all say? What should we do now?'

Tanaji said, 'You tell us. We will do exactly as you say.'

Shivaji began to speak decisively, 'Right now there are only two hundred and fifty warriors in Torna fort. Two hundred and fifty men cannot battle against seven thousand. They have

cannons with them and we do not even have a gun. What is the solution in this situation? There are two ways. One, we leave the fort and escape. That'll save our lives, but it'll mean surrendering the fort in their hands. The second option is to close the gates of the fort and to sit tight. But they have twenty cannons. Torna is a small fort and they can easily raze it to the ground.'

Shivaji stopped. Everyone looked at his face.

Finally, Jessaji said, 'Is there no other way?'

Shivaji asked, 'Don't you all like any one of these two?'

They all shook their heads together and said, 'No.'

Then Shivaji laughed a little and said, 'I have just had an idea. Only one thing can save us now. The barrels of gunpowder.'

Everyone was amazed, 'Barrels of gunpowder!'

'Yes. They have a hundred barrels of gunpowder with them. That ammunition is what we have to rely on now.'

Tanaji said, 'Their ammunition will *save* us! I can't understand a bit of what you are saying.'

'Let me explain.' Rapidly Shivaji laid out his plan before them. Everyone's eyes glittered with excitement when they heard it all. Tanaji slapped his thigh and said, 'I will go!'

Jessaji said, 'With your gigantic looks, you'll fit the bill all right.'

Ratnaji said dolefully, 'They'll recognize me the minute they see me.'

Shivaji said, 'This is not for any of you.'

Tanaji said, 'Are you thinking of going yourself? No, that won't do. We won't let you go. Finally, if—'

Shivaji said, 'No, I won't go. Sadashiv will.'

Sadashiv was listening to all of this sitting behind Shivaji. He was taken aback.

Shivaji brought him forward and said, 'Sadashiv may look young and he hasn't yet grown a moustache, but he is very smart. If anyone can do this job, it's him.'

Sadashiv's heart leapt with joy. He said, 'Shibba Rao, tell me what I have to do.'

Shivaji began to instruct Sadashiv on what was to be done.

CHAPTER TWO

Before the sun rose the following morning, the iron gates of the fort opened just a crack. Sadashiv and a flock of goats slipped out. The gates closed again.

Sadashiv wore tattered and dirty clothes. He carried a herding stick, which had an iron ball at one end, in his right hand. In his left hand he held a long rope made of coconut husk, wound into a ball. He looked back once at the closed gates of the fort and then followed the herd of goats.

There were about twenty goats in the fort. Jijabai drank goat's milk every day. Usually, a small boy took them out to graze. Today, Sadashiv had taken his place.

The goats went along, leaping and bleating. There was no grass or shrubs near the fort; it was rocky soil. There were many pebbles strewn on the ground and among them were some flint stones too. The flint stones sparkled in the sunlight. Sadashiv picked up a chip in his hand and inspected it, a smile playing on his lips. He tucked the stone into his waistband and continued to follow the goats as they ran towards the valley.

As one descended towards the valley, there was grass, shrubs and trees. Everything was a bright green after the monsoon rains. The goats wandered into those grassy lands and began to graze.

The sun came up. There weren't too many clouds in the sky. Sadashiv roamed behind the goats, his eyes scanning the horizon, especially the direction from which Ratnaji had come the previous day. But there was nothing to be seen or heard. Behind him was the dark silhouette of the fort. All around lay the undulating rows of hills.

The tranquil day wore on. Some more clouds gathered. From time to time, the sun peeped out from behind the clouds that played like shadows on the hills. The goats continued grazing happily, moving slowly away from the fort in their quest for fresh pastures. A couple of them moved away from the flock, and Sadashiv herded them back. He was a village boy and herding goats wasn't new to him.

The sun was in mid-sky. Sadashiv was a couple of miles away from the fort when he heard sounds from beyond the mountains and pricked up his ears. They were not exactly sounds, they were more like echoes: the kind of noise that you hear on a summer afternoon when the hot breeze rustles over dry grass.

The seven thousand soldiers of Bijapur were coming. They were not visible yet, but they were coming.

A little later, they came within sight, filing out from behind the mountain in the distance. At the head were the horsemen, followed by the infantry; then came the twenty bullock carts loaded with the cannons. Each cart was pulled by eight to ten bullocks. Behind these carts were many more carrying tents, luggage and ammunition.

Sadashiv had never set eyes upon so many men together! He gawked in round-eyed amazement and his heart beat faster. He murmured Ma Bhawani's name to himself, gathered the goats behind a bush and waited quietly.

At three in the afternoon, the Bijapuri soldiers laid siege to the Torna fort. They didn't go too close to the fort, in case there were guns inside. But they surrounded it in a large circle about three hundred yards from the gates and walls.

Soon, innumerable tents came up. In the centre was the huge tent of the commander-in-chief. The servants, cooks and soldiers began milling around. The war trumpets rang out. In the kitchen, behind the tents, could be heard the bustle of preparing meals for seven thousand soldiers.

In front of the commander's tent, a sitting area was constructed with large pillows on thick mattresses. Liyaquat Khan leaned against a pillow as he puffed on the hubble-bubble and gazed at the fort. He was an elderly man and a veteran army-chief. Two subordinates kneeled before him. The chief was tired and he spoke a little every now and then.

Liyaquat Khan lowered his gaze from the fort and said, 'The

mountain rat has been trapped in the cage; he hasn't escaped.'

One of his aides said, 'He didn't have time to escape. If he had, the fort gates would be open.'

The commander said, 'That is no indication. Shivaji is extremely cunning. He could leave two men in the fort and escape with the rest. But he hasn't; I've got news from our spies.'

Another aide asked, 'And that two-faced horse-thief?'

The commander's face grew red with anger. 'That faithless ingrate was indeed Shivaji's spy and he came to this fort yesterday afternoon. Shivaji got the news beforehand, but couldn't escape with his loot. Now he has no way out. We'll blow them up with the cannons.'

A young soldier came up, saluted and said, 'Sir, the barrels of gunpowder have been placed behind the tents under a cover. The cannons have not yet been unloaded from the bullock carts. What would you command us to do next, sir?'

The commander glanced at the western sky; it was close to sunset. He said, 'It is almost dusk. There's no need to unload the cannons from the bullock carts. Tomorrow morning we'll place the cannons in front of the fort. For tonight, check that the security is tight.'

'Yes, sir.' The soldier saluted and left.

The commander-in-chief sat and puffed on his hookah for some time. After a while, he heard bleating sounds close by, coming in his direction. It was accompanied by peals of laughter from the soldiers. He frowned and looked up.

He saw a flock of goats advancing between two rows of tents. Behind them, a sentry pulled along a young boy with a rope

tied around his waist and occasionally prodded him with a herding stick. With them were a bunch of soldiers, laughing and joking.

The sentry came up and saluted the commander.

Liyaquat Khan said, 'What is all this? Who is this boy? Where did so many goats come from?'

The sentry said, 'Huzrat, this goatherd was hiding in the woods to the west of the camp with his flock. I heard them bleating. I caught him and tied him up in his own rope.'

The commander turned to Sadashiv menacingly. He asked harshly, 'Who are you?'

Sadashiv burst into tears.

The soldiers standing nearby watching the fun, began to laugh but stopped immediately. It was a crime to laugh in front of the commander-in-chief.

Liyaquat Khan assumed that the boy must be fourteen or fifteen years old. He seemed to be very nervous in his presence. He softened his tone a little and asked, 'Don't be afraid. Where did you get these goats?'

Sadashiv sniffed and stopped crying. In a shaky tone he said, 'From the fort. I take them out to graze.'

'You stay in the fort?' The commander was now very interested.

Sadashiv said, 'Yes.'

'Is Shivaji in the fort?'

'Yes, he is.'

'Who else is there?'

'Two or three hundred more people.'

'Did someone come to the fort from outside yesterday?'

'I don't know. I leave the fort early to graze the goats and go back only in the evening.'

'Why didn't you return today?'

'I was about to go back when you people arrived. I was scared and so I hid in the bushes.'

From Sadashiv's manner and tone the commander felt that he was telling the truth. He didn't seem to be the kind of person who would dare to lie in the commander's presence. He told the sentry, 'Take the ropes off his waist.'

The sentry untied Sadashiv and threw his stick back at him. As soon as he was freed, Sadashiv sat down to weep again.

Liyaquat Khan said, 'What is it now?'

Sadashiv said, 'I want to go back to the fort.'

'How can you return to the fort? The gates are shut.'

'But I am so hungry!'

This time the commander also laughed with the other soldiers. He said to the sentry, 'Take him away and give him something to eat. Send the goats to the kitchen.'

The soldiers dragged the goats into the kitchen. They'd probably eat them up, Sadashiv thought sadly.

After Sadashiv had wound his coconut-husk rope into a ball and picked up his herding stick, the sentry led him to the kitchen. As they walked, he asked, 'What do you want to eat?'

Sadashiv said, 'Millet rotis and tamarind chutney.'

'Millet rotis and tamarind chutney!' the sentry laughed. 'Don't you want to have koftas and kababs?'

Sadashiv asked, 'What is all that?'

'Beef! Have you ever eaten beef?'

'No, that is against my religion. I won't have that.'

There were many Hindu soldiers in the Bijapuri army, for whom food was cooked in a separate kitchen. The sentry took Sadashiv towards that kitchen, which was towards the back of the camp.

There were huge stoves lit in an open area and several Brahmin cooks were busy cooking there. The sentry called out to one of them and said, 'The commander's orders: give this boy some food to eat.'

The cook asked, 'Who is he?'

The sentry said, 'How does that matter to you? Do what you are told.' He walked away.

Sadashiv was finally alone. He felt a bit sad about the goats, but what could he do? He tied the rope around his waist, placed the stick on the ground and began to look around him.

A short distance away stood two rows of bullock carts loaded with the thick cannons that looked like the trunks of coconut palms. Between the two rows, towards the centre, were some piles which were well covered. Two bearded sentries, armed with spears, marched around them, keeping a close guard.

Sadashiv guessed that the piles must be the barrels of gunpowder. They were covered so that they wouldn't get wet if it rained.

A little later, the cook brought some food for Sadashiv: thick millet rotis, toor dal, string gourd curry and some ghee. Sadashiv ate heartily.

By the time he finished, it was dark. Making sure no one was watching him, Sadashiv began to explore the camp cautiously. All around him, the soldiers, servants and cooks were

busy with their own chores. No one paid any heed to a young shabby boy.

Night fell. The camp was illuminated by torches. Loads of food was being carried into each tent, and the ravenous soldiers fell upon them with hearty appetites. Sadashiv decided this was the best time to look for a place to sleep.

Towards the back of the camp, there was a pile of spare tents and other material about twenty yards away from where the cannons and gunpowder were. Sadashiv curled up in it.

The moon peeped from behind the clouds. The two sentries stood on guard over the bullock carts. Sadashiv hugged the herding stick close to him. 'Two o'clock,' he murmured to himself, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Sadashiv opened his eyes. It had been a nice nap. The moon had set and the cloudless sky was radiant with stars. There was silence in the camp—everyone was asleep.

Sadashiv sat up slowly on his bed of tents and material. He felt his waist and checked if he still had the coconut-husk rope and the flint stone. His hand closed around the herding stick and he gripped it firmly. He sat for a while to let his eyes get used to the dark and for his ears to get attuned to the sounds of the night. He waited, listening patiently in the darkness to the camp at night, the tents full of sleeping men.

No, everyone in the camp wasn't asleep; the sentries were

awake. The two sentries near the cannons marched as before. Other sentries, carrying flaming torches, were patrolling all around the camp. As they marched, they yelled out from time to time, 'Watch out! Watch out! Sleep cautiously in the enemy's terrain!' In the light of their torches, the sentries looked like ghosts; their unearthly call was frightening.

'Jai Bhawani!' thought Sadashiv. He waited till the patrolling guards had passed him and moved on. And then swiftly, he crawled out of the pile of tents and towards the cannons. He hoped desperately that he was right in his belief that the barrels of gunpowder were there too. He moved as stealthily as a black cat in the dark; there wasn't the slightest sound.

The two sentries who were on guard near the cannons were not carrying torches. In the darkness, Sadashiv could see them walk around the rows of cannons in different directions, crossing at each end at regular intervals.

When Sadashiv came within ten yards of one end of the rows of cannons, he heard the two sentries heading that way from either direction. He quickly crawled under a bush and lay down there.

The men began to talk as they came closer to each other. Their voices were audible in the silence.

'Mian, are you feeling cold?'

The second guard replied, 'Yes, Aga! It's a hilly country and so it gets quite cool at nights. It'll be great if we could light a fire.'

Aga said, 'Watch out! Don't even mention fire. If we light a fire near this gunpowder, they'll behead us immediately.'

Mian's response could not be heard as the two crossed each

other and began their round of the carts again. But Sadashiv did not care. He had got the information he wanted—the barrels of gunpowder were indeed right there.

When their footsteps faded away, Sadashiv came out of the bush and crawled swiftly towards the nearest cart, dragging the stick along the ground with him. If anyone saw him now, they would think a huge crab had crawled out of its burrow and was out hunting for food; he didn't seem human at all.

Sadashiv reached the nearest cart and hid under it. Just in time, for he heard the sentries come towards that end of the row again. Sadashiv lay as flat and still as possible, trying not to breathe.

Their voices became audible as they approached each other.

'Mian, a cup of wine at this time wouldn't be bad at all, right?'

Mian said, 'Wine be damned, I'd go for a bowl of country liquor too right now.'

They were so close now that Sadashiv could see two pairs of feet approach, cross and move away in different directions in close detail. If he reached out, he could even touch them.

Aga made a sound in his throat and laughed as they moved off in different directions.

When their footsteps faded again, Sadashiv crawled swiftly under successive bullock carts until he reached the spot where the covered piles loomed up. He lifted the edge of the covering and slipped underneath.

It was pitch dark under the covering. He could not see anything at all. He began to feel around with his hands. His fingers came into contact with the body of a barrel.

The barrel had wooden planks on top. Sadashiv slipped his hand under the planks and his fingers came into contact with a sandy powder. From what Shivaji had told him, this indeed was what he had set out to find—the gunpowder. His heart leaped for joy.

The very next second, his heart almost stopped beating. *CLANG, CLANG, CLANG!* The horrible noise seemed to rip the darkness apart. Sadashiv froze, expecting the covering to be ripped off, and for him to be surrounded by angry sentries pointing spears at him.

A few moments passed. Nothing happened. After a while, he heard the sentries shout far away: 'Watch out! Watch out! Sleep cautiously in the enemy's terrain!' Sadashiv breathed again. He realized it must have been the night gong, marking the passing of the hours.

After what felt like hours, his hands stopped shaking. He heaved a sigh, and said to himself, 'Now!'

He unwound the coconut-husk rope from his waist and tucked one end of it into the barrel of gunpowder. He placed the other end on the ground. Very carefully he took out the flint stone from his waistband. Taking the iron end of his staff in his hand, Sadashiv began to strike it very cautiously with the flint stone, trying to cause as little noise as possible. He did not want the sentries to hear the distinctive sound!

Little sparks of fire began to fly and land on the end of the rope. Gradually, the rope caught fire. It was a small glow, hardly visible to the eye; but once the rope caught fire, it wouldn't die. When the fire burnt up the rope and went into the barrel of gunpowder, then . . .

Sadashiv peeped out from under the covering, watching for the sentries to move to the other end. As soon as they headed in that way, he rolled quickly under the nearest bullock cart, and down the line in the opposite direction from where he had come. At the end of the row, he crawled swiftly behind some bushes, and out of the camp.

Keeping under the covering of the shrubs and bushes, Sadashiv ran swiftly around the camp, beyond the sight of the sentries marching around and bellowing. Then he struck out in the direction of the fort, still keeping under cover.

At a small side gate to the courtyard at the centre of the fort, Sadashiv knocked with the metal end of his herding stick. Shivaji himself opened the gates. Behind him, all the people of the fort stood in a crowd.

Shivaji asked, 'Is the mission accomplished?'

Sadashiv said, 'It is.'

Shivaji spread his arms and hugged Sadashiv close.

They ran swiftly up to the terrace and gazed over the parapet at the Bijapuri camp, which was a glow of white tents in the starlight with the tiny blaze of torches as the sentries patrolled.

Time seemed to stand still. Standing on Shivaji's left, with Tanaji and Jessaji to Shivaji's other side, Sadashiv shivered. 'What is the matter? Why hasn't anything happened yet?' he thought desperately. 'How long does it take for three feet of rope to burn? Has the fire gone out...?' It frightened him that the future of all the people in this fort, and of the great Shivaji, rested on him, and a tiny fire at one end of a coconut-husk rope!

He became aware that a cold breeze was blowing, that the first tinge of light had appeared in the eastern sky. The night

was almost over . . .

A blaze of blinding fire ripped apart the camp and rose towards the sky. Then came the sound, like the roar of a million demons. A sudden surge of heat seared their faces, shining orange in the light of the explosion. And then all was dark again. Through the silence that rang in their ears, they could hear the cries of men.

'Har Har Mahadeo!' Tanaji suddenly lifted Sadashiv on to his shoulder and began to dance.

Shivaji said, 'Jai Bhawani! Come, we must go to the camp immediately.'

As the first light of dawn spread across the sky, Shivaji and his two hundred and fifty soldiers reached the site of the Bijapuri camp. The tents were flattened, the men lay dead on the ground; weapons, clothes and utensils were scattered all around. There were signs of flight—all the horses were gone and clearly all the soldiers who had survived the explosion had sought refuge in the woods. On the scorched ground, the cannons lay like the trunks of felled palm trees; the carts had been burnt to ashes.

Shivaji ordered his men to carry the cannons inside the fort. It took thirty men to carry each one. They collected the cannon balls and carried those into the fort, as well as gold coins, utensils, spears and swords lying around. All of it would come in useful.

Shivaji said, 'I will use these cannons to protect the Torna fort. Now let the enemies come—I am not afraid.'

Sadashiv said, 'But—what about gunpowder?'

Shivaji said, 'There are artisans in Poona who know how to make gunpowder. I'll bring them here. It's not difficult to make gunpowder; forging these cannons is the tough part. Now that

I have the cannons, no one will be able to seize Torna fort from me.'

That evening, there was great celebration at the fort. They were secure, they had vanquished a mighty enemy without losing a single man. Everyone wanted to praise Sadashiv, the hero of the hour, but he was too embarrassed and sought refuge with Jijabai.

Jijabai asked, 'So what do you want to eat?'

Sadashiv thought back to the afternoon two days earlier—how long ago it seemed—and said, 'Doodhi halwa!'

Sadashiv had never tasted doodhi halwa before!

PART III
THE MARATHON

CHAPTER ONE

Shahji Bhonsle, Shivaji's father, was a commander in the army of Bijapur. He was stationed at the court of Bijapur; but he had to take his troops and go to battle whenever and wherever the sultan ordered him.

Shahji owned lots of land in Poona, which was his special jagir, but he couldn't really go there very often. But his wife Jijabai and son Shivaji lived there. Father and son seldom met each other, and were not close. Growing up without his father around meant that Shivaji was not bothered by his father's authority.

When Shivaji grew up and began to annex the fortresses of

the Bijapuri kingdom one by one, Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah summoned Shahji. 'What is all this I hear! You are a commander in my army and your son is seizing all my fortresses! Can't you control your son?'

Shahji said, 'Huzrat, my son is very wicked and I have disowned him. He doesn't obey me at all. So you have to discipline him.'

The sultan was displeased. For one moment he was tempted to order Shahji to take his army and fight Shivaji on his behalf. But there was a problem in that—if Shahji went and joined forces with his son, the situation would become worse.

The sultan said, 'Fine, I'll bring your son to heel. Now, I am sending my commander-in-chief, Mustafa Khan, to lay siege to the Gingee fort; you and your forces must join him and aid him.'

Gingee fort was to the south of Bijapur, and Poona to the north. Gingee was nearly seven hundred miles from Poona. Shahji left for Gingee.

Adil Shah tried many times to vanquish Shivaji. His latest attempt had been to send a troop of seven thousand soldiers under Liyaquat Khan.

Even as the people in Torna fort celebrated, Shivaji was worried. When the news of this immense defeat reached the Bijapur court, what would the sultan do? Adil Shah didn't have the power to control Shivaji, but Shahji was within his reach. What if the sultan, in the throes of anger, killed Shahji?

The following evening, Shivaji called his close friends and trusted advisers to discuss this. Among those present were Tanaji, Jessaji and Baji Pasalkar. Jijabai sat in a corner and followed the

discussion. She was often present in such sessions. After all, they were all young men, and she wanted to make sure they took no rash decisions. But unless absolutely necessary, she seldom said a word.

Sadashiv was at the stable, grooming his horse. In these few months, the horse had been well fed and looked very different from the emaciated creature who had carried him away from the village.

All at once, he heard a deep voice call, 'Sadashivvvv!'

It was Tanaji, calling from the terrace. As Sadashiv came out of the stable and gazed up, Tanaji gestured for him to come up. Sadashiv set off at a run. It must be something urgent.

When he reached the terrace, people were gathered in the centre, listening to Shivaji. Sadashiv sat down quietly behind him.

Shivaji was saying, 'It'll take four or five days for the news to reach Bijapur. Once it does, there'll be chaos all round and there's no telling what the sultan will do. Hence, the news should reach Father before it reaches the sultan. Once he knows, he'll do whatever he thinks is right.'

Baji Pasalkar said, 'Absolutely. If he gets to know first, Shahji can always escape to Poona. The sultan won't be able to touch him there.'

Shivaji said, 'Yes. But Father may not be in Bijapur. He may have been ordered by the sultan to go somewhere else. Wherever he is, the news should reach him as soon as possible. Now the question is, who will be the messenger? To go into enemy terrain is to put your life at risk. If you are caught, you're as good as dead. So we have to send someone who is

clever as well as bold, whose chances of getting caught are slim. Who will go?'

Baji Pasalkar said, 'Whoever you call upon, will go.'

Tanaji said, 'Shibba, please command me—I'll go.'

Shivaji laughed and said, 'You won't do. Many people know that you are Shivaji's friend. Besides, you attract attention because of the way you look. Your chances of being seized are too high!'

'Then whom do you want to send?'

Shivaji looked behind him and reached out for Sadashiv. He said, 'I want to send this boy. He has already proved that he is sharp as well as bold. Moreover, he is not yet marked as one of my men. The few of the enemy who have seen him are all dead. He is the safest bet.'

Everyone was silent. There was no doubt that Sadashiv possessed the right qualities to undertake this dangerous mission.

There was a protest from a corner. Jijabai demurred, 'Sadashiv is very young. Will he be able to go so far away? What if he loses his way?'

Shivaji laughed. 'Sadashiv is not a person to lose his way. What do you say, Sadashiv?'

Abashed, Sadashiv said, 'No, I won't lose my way. I may look young, but I am sixteen years old. I can go wherever you tell me to go. Just show me which road to take and I'll surely find my way to Bijapur.'

Shivaji said, 'We'll show you the way. You'll have to go on horseback and reach there as quickly as you can.'

Sadashiv said, 'My horse has eaten well these few months

and is now in good health. He'll be able to take me as far as you want me to go.'

Shivaji shook his head. 'Your horse won't do. There'll be many rivers to cross on the way. Your horse won't be able to swim and it'll drown in a trice. I have a horse called Sindhughotak—that's the horse you'll take. It can cross Krishna-Godavari with three maunds of weight on its back.'

Sindhughotak was one of the ten or twelve horses in the stable that belonged to Shivaji. It was a huge animal, stout and with a big belly. It could not run too fast, but it was extraordinarily sturdy.

Sadashiv was enormously excited. He was to go on one of Shivaji's special horses—what an honour! He jumped up and said, 'Why don't I start right away?'

Shivaji looked at the sky. The sun was setting. He said, 'It's too late today. Start early tomorrow morning. I'll set you off on the road to Bijapur. Just one thing . . . Father doesn't know you. What if he refuses to believe what you say?'

Jijabai removed a copper amulet from her arm and tied it on Sadashiv's. She said, 'Show him this amulet and he'll recognize it. It'll save you from harm as well, it holds the flowers blessed by Ma Bhawani.'

CHAPTER TWO

As the first rays of the sun touched the eastern sky, Sadashiv rode out of the fort on Sindhughotak. With him were Shivaji and Tanaji.

No one would imagine Sadashiv was the same boy who had been herding goats three days ago, dressed in tattered clothes. Today, he wore smart, clean clothes, shoes and a turban. Jijabai had applied kohl to his eyes. It was almost impossible to recognize Sadashiv. He did not carry any weapons, apart from a tiny dagger tucked into his waistband. He also carried a bag of food and some copper coins in his pocket. In these unsettled times, it was unsafe for a lone traveller to carry too much

money on his person. There were many soldiers who had deserted their posts and taken to robbing travellers and raiding villages.

Shivaji and Tanaji rode ahead, galloping on their spirited horses, Sadashiv followed on his stout mount. They led Sadashiv in the direction that the Bijapuri army had come from, through a narrow mountain pass.

The sun rose and the dew on the leaves and grass glistened in the bright light. Sadashiv noticed that the tyre-marks of cannon-laden bullock carts were still fresh on the pebbled roadway. Most of the men were no more but the marks of the wheels remained. Who knew where the surviving soldiers had fled.

It was nearly noon before they crossed the hilly region and reached flatter ground. From here the road went south; it wasn't a very good road, but it was a road nonetheless. On horseback, it was not difficult to travel.

Shivaji drew rein and pointed ahead. 'This road goes to Bijapur. There will be some wayside villages along it. Stop there for the night, but avoid places that are very crowded. It'll take you five to six days to reach the city. Come back as soon as you finish your work there. Will you be able to find your way back?'

Sadashiv said, 'I will.'

'Do you remember everything I said?'

'I do.'

'Fine. Then get going now. Jai Bhawani!'

Sadashiv said, 'Jai Bhawani,' and sped away on his horse. Shivaji and Tanaji stayed where they were and watched his form diminish into the distance. When he was barely visible, they turned their

horses towards Torna fort and headed back.

Sadashiv rode on. He was on his own, a vital task rested upon him. But he felt no fear in his heart. Instead, he felt excited at the thought that from now on it was his wits against the world. Every action of his, his success in carrying off this mission, would depend on his own presence of mind.

Sindhughotak cantered at a leisurely pace. He could not gallop, but neither did he dawdle. At this rate, Sadashiv calculated, it would be possible to cover forty to fifty miles a day. Sindhughotak's back was quite broad; it felt like sitting on a throne. He was also very even tempered. Sadashiv journeyed on quite cheerfully.

The sun leaned to the west. In his charged-up state, Sadashiv had lost track of hunger and thirst, but Sindhughotak hadn't. After travelling for about two hours he stopped.

A stream overflowed from the right on to the road. It was a small stream, and sand glistened at the bottom. Sindhughotak stood at the edge, lowered his head and began to drink up noisily.

Sadashiv suddenly remembered that he hadn't yet eaten. He dismounted, let Sindhughotak wander towards the grassy patch by the stream, and sat down on a nearby stone.

He opened the bag he was carrying. Jijabai had packed a lot of food: millet rotis fried in ghee, spicy *chakris* made from dal, and *motichoor* laddus. All the food would not go bad for several days.

After he finished eating, Sadashiv looked at what remained. He thought that the food should last him a couple of days. He got up, and cupped his palms to drink water from the stream. When he had drunk his fill, he called Sindhughotak.

In the meantime, Sindhughotak had feasted on the grass by the roadside. Sadashiv clambered onto his back. They waded through the ankle-deep water of the stream and ambled on.

There were hardly any people on the road. There were some signs of habitation by the wayside, clusters of huts huddled together as if in fear. But the huts were empty. When the Bijapuri army had passed from here a few days ago on their way to the fort, people had fled in terror. They had not returned yet.

As the sun reached the mountain peaks in the west, they came to a wide river. It was about two hundred yards across. Sadashiv guessed this must be the river Nira that Shivaji had told him about. The source of the Nira was in the Sahyadri ranges and it flowed east to merge with the river Bheema.

On the banks of the river, by the roadside was a village. But, like the other settlements he had passed, there was no one in it. Near the bank, a boat lay half-submerged, with only the edge peeping out. Sadashiv thought that this must have been the ferry.

This was where one had to cross the river. The road dipped into the river, and Sadashiv could see it lead away like a misty line on the other side.

Sadashiv decided to spend the night here. There were many huts lying vacant and he could sleep in one of them and start his journey again the next day.

At that moment, Sindhughotak raised his head and let out a neigh, the kind a horse does when it smells another horse.

Sadashiv looked all around, but he couldn't see either a horse or a human being. He dismounted, took the reins to lead Sindhughotak, and entered the village.

It was a small village. There was nothing much there except twenty or twenty-five mud huts and one cattle-shed. The doors of all the huts lay wide open. Sadashiv peered in and saw that there was nothing in them. The villagers had taken everything and fled.

It was in the cattle-shed that he made an amazing discovery. A large, rust-coloured horse was tied there. It was not a hill horse, of the kind that village people used. How did this horse come here?

When the horse saw Sadashiv it pricked up its ears and snorted, and Sindhughotak whinnied in response. Sadashiv noticed that the right front knee of the horse was bandaged and that it limped slightly as it moved in the shed.

Sadashiv moved away quietly, his mind working furiously. The owner of the horse was surely in the same village, but, he suspected, had just got there after the Bijapuri army had passed. He may have even have arrived that very day, for there was no reason for anyone to linger in this village. Where was the rider from? Where was he going? Why was he hiding? Was he, then, a thief or a burglar?

The sun had set while Sadashiv was exploring the village, and now a crescent moon was showing off in the centre of the sky. Sadashiv came back to the entrance of the village. At the entrance was a bigger hut, which perhaps belonged to the village chief. It was empty like all the others, but the door of the hut had a latch and it could be locked from within. Sadashiv decided to sleep in that hut for the night. There was a field in front where Sindhughotak could graze.

Sadashiv unsaddled and unbridled Sindhughotak, and rubbed

him down. He took the blanket off his back and took it to the hut. This would be his bed. Then he sat at the doorway of the hut and began to eat his dinner.

Through all this, a sense of unease nagged him. He could not forget his misgivings about the mysterious horse and its rider. What if the rider had tied his horse there and left? No, that wasn't possible; he must be hiding in one of these huts. No one would leave his horse and go away. Since there was only one horse, there must be only one man. But why was he hiding? Was he frightened when he saw Sadashiv and that's why he went into hiding?

In the meantime, the moon grew brighter. All around him a haze hung like a blue mist. Sadashiv finished his meal, went to the river and drank some water. There wasn't a sound to be heard except those of nature as the world settled down for the night.

Sindhughotak was munching on some grass peacefully as Sadashiv went into the hut. He bolted the door and lay down. He tried to reason with himself. Even if there *was* a man around, what was the harm in it? He took his dagger out from his waistband and placed it beside his head. The next day he would cross the river at the crack of dawn.

He woke up suddenly at the sound of Sindhughotak snorting. It was late, though he had no idea how late. But there had been a sound which had disturbed him . . .

Sadashiv went quietly to the door and looked out through the peephole by it.

In the light of the setting moon, he could see Sindhughotak sitting in the middle of the field. By him stood a man, holding

the reins of the lame horse. Sadashiv could barely make out the man's features but he could see that he was bearded.

The man snapped his fingers and made chuckling noises. Sindhughotak only snorted again. He had obviously had a full meal and had no intention of rising.

The man looked around cautiously, and then kicked Sindhughotak gently on the belly to make him stand.

In that instant Sadashiv understood what was happening. Who the man was, why he was hiding here and why his horse was lame—everything was suddenly clear.

He put his mouth to the peephole and made the most horrible noise in his throat that he could manage: 'Hrrrrrr—hngggktkt—hukkk—hukkk!'

The man was startled. In a flash, he leaped on to his lame horse and spurred it on as fast as it could go out of the village.

Sadashiv unbolted the door and came out. He saw that the man was going in the direction of the river. Then he heard splashing sounds—the horse was crossing the river.

Sadashiv came back into the hut and bolted the door again. He sat down to gather his thoughts. The man was Muslim. He must have been in the army that had come from Bijapur to attack the Torna fort. By a stroke of luck, he and his horse had survived, though the horse had been wounded. Now the man was rushing to Bijapur to give the news. He was hiding so that he wouldn't be caught in Shivaji's territory.

And that was why he was trying to steal Sindhughotak. A lame horse could not travel fast, and to come across a fresh, healthy horse must have seemed like a miracle to him.

Sadashiv decided that he must reach Bijapur before that man,

by whatever means possible. But there was no need to hurry tonight. How far could the man travel on a lame horse?

He went back to his blanket. His last thought was of gratitude—thanking Ma Bhawani he had woken up before the man could steal Sindhughotak! Otherwise, in the morning he'd have found Sindhughotak gone and the lame horse standing in its place.

CHAPTER THREE

At the first sign of daybreak, Sadashiv set off. Although the river was almost two hundred yards across at that spot, it wasn't very deep near the banks. Midway between the two banks, it was about fifty yards deep. But Shivaji had chosen Sadashiv's mount wisely. Sindhughotak swam across the river with no difficulty. Sadashiv just lifted his legs and sat comfortably.

They reached the other bank and Sindhughotak clambered out. He gave one shake to his body to get rid of the water and Sadashiv nearly fell off. But he managed to retain his hold somehow. Then Sindhughotak ambled along as before.

There was not a soul on the road. They passed another village,

but it too was deserted. The undulating road wound its way, sometimes disappearing behind hills.

Sadashiv saw no sign of the man on the lame horse. Perhaps he had ridden all night long and covered quite a distance.

The day wore on.

At noon, Sadashiv saw a village in the distance. Most unusually, there seemed to be people in it. As he rode by it, he reined in his horse, raised his arm and called out.

None of the villagers came forward. They stood at a distance with lathis in their hands, eyeing him suspiciously. Sadashiv called out again.

An old man came forward and asked, 'Who are you? What do you want?'

Sadashiv said, 'I'm a traveller. Some urgent work takes me to Bijapur. Why are you afraid of me?'

The old man said, 'The Bijapuri soldiers looted our village. Are you in the Bijapur army?'

Sadashiv said, 'No, no, I'm from Poona. Can't you see I'm a Maratha?'

The old man said, 'Then why are you going to Bijapur?'

Sadashiv had a ready answer for this question. He said, 'I'm looking for my uncle. Can you tell me if a man has gone this way on a lame horse?'

The old man said, 'Yes, yes, very early in the morning he did, when the sun wasn't even up. Is that your uncle?'

Sadashiv didn't waste any more time and galloped away. The man from the previous night had covered a lot of distance overnight. But Sadashiv was sure he'd catch up with him before dusk.

There were no more big rivers on the way; but there were many small streams. He ate lunch on horseback, and stopped only briefly to let Sindhughotak graze.

But even as dusk approached, there was no sign of the lame horse. Where *was* that horse? Had the rider taken the mountain route to avoid the normal road? No, it'd be impossible for a lame horse to cross the hilly terrain. They must be on the road. But where could they be?

The sun set and the moon rose. It was the same moon as the day before, only slightly bigger. Sadashiv didn't stop; he just went on. He decided to spend the night in a vacant hut if he came across an empty village, but otherwise he could easily take shelter on a tree. He was a bit more concerned about food. What he had would last him till the following morning. He needed to stock up. His biggest problem was that Sindhughotak was also tired and was pausing frequently. He had to urge him constantly to keep him going.

It was when Sindhughotak stopped thus at one point when suddenly Sadashiv heard the tinkling sounds of a bell. This was a familiar sound: it was the evening *arati* at the village temple. Sadashiv looked all around, but could not see a village. But there was a knoll and on it there were the faint marks of human footprints. Perhaps the village lay on the other side of the mound and couldn't be seen from the road. Sadashiv dismounted, took Sindhughotak's reins and walked towards the knoll.

It was an uneven uphill climb. After walking for fifty or sixty yards, Sadashiv reached the top. Yes, right ahead, nestled along the knoll was a small village. There were thirty or forty

huts with straw roofs, but there were no lamps shining in any of the windows. In the moonlight, the vacant village lay subdued.

Sadashiv was surprised. If there was no one in the village, then who was ringing the temple bell? Just at that moment he heard it again—*ding*, *dong*, *ding*. The sound came from within the village.

Sadashiv left Sindhughotak and went into the village. The huts were scattered haphazardly and the walkway wound its way among them. As he walked through it, looking around, he suddenly saw a tiny temple, which had a lamp lit within. It was a stone temple; perhaps the only solid construction in the village. But even around the temple there was no one to be seen.

Sadashiv tiptoed his way towards the open temple doors. Through them he saw Vithoba's statue inside; a little girl sat before it and performed the puja.

The girl had her back to the door and so she couldn't see him. Sadashiv looked around the temple; there was no one with her.

As Sadashiv took another step towards the doors, intent on what he saw within, some pebbles crunched under his feet. The girl turned around at the sound. She gave a strangled cry, jumped up and bolted the doors from within.

For a while both of them were silent. Then Sadashiv cleared his throat and said, 'Don't be afraid. I will not harm you.'

There was no sound from within the temple. Sadashiv spoke again, 'I have no evil intentions. If you are afraid, I'm leaving.'

But he didn't leave. As he waited, a little later, a delicate, feminine voice came from within, 'Who are you? What do you want?'

Sadashiv said, 'I don't want anything. I'm a Maratha, Hindu. I was going this way when the sound of the bell brought me here. Is this a temple of Vithhal?'

From inside, the girl replied, 'Yes. You are not a Bijapuri soldier?'

Sadashiv said, 'No. I come from Poona.'

Again there were a few minutes of silence. Then there was a slight sound. The door opened just a crack and the girl peered out. She saw that the stranger was young and not armed; he only carried a sack. She opened the door further and asked, 'What is your name?'

'Sadashiv.'

'What do you want here?'

'I've already said I don't want anything. I heard the temple bell and came to see. Were you worshipping Vithhal?'

'Yes.'

Sadashiv bent and touched the temple threshold with his head. He said, 'Why is there no one in the village?'

The girl came to the threshold cautiously. 'When the Bijapuri soldiers came, all the villagers fled,' she said. 'They are hiding in the caves in these mountains.'

The moonlight from outside shone on her, and the lamp lit her from behind. Sadashiv could now see her clearly. She was dark, petite and pretty. She seemed hardly more than eleven or twelve years old. What was she doing alone in this deserted village!

He asked, 'Are you here all alone?'

The girl smiled a little. 'No, I had also fled. My father is the priest of this temple; he is old and was wounded in the hands of

the Bijapuris. He can't come and so I come and do the puja of Vithhal.'

Sadashiv heaved a sigh, sat down on the threshold and said, 'The Bijapuri soldiers really trouble you a lot, don't they? But Shivaji's soldiers never torture the villagers.'

By now the girl was no longer afraid; instead she was curious. She also sat upon the platform and said, 'I've heard of Shivaji. Are you in his band?'

Sadashiv nodded slightly. Talking to the girl reminded him of Kunku. He said, 'In my village there is a girl like you; her name is Kunku. What is your name?'

The girl inclined her head slightly and said, 'Sevanti.'

She seemed to lose her distrust after that, and was full of questions, which he answered patiently. After a while, Sadashiv said, 'Sevanti behin, I'm very thirsty. Could you give me some water?'

'Yes,' Sevanti went in and brought some water from the temple. Sadashiv held up the copper bowl and drank all the water.

Sevanti kept the bowl back in its place and sat down by him. She said, 'Sadashiv bhai, what do you have in your sack?'

Sadashiv said, 'Food. But there isn't much left, most of it is gone. I'm wondering what I'll eat tomorrow.'

Sevanti asked, 'What will you do now? Will you stay here tonight?'

'If you have no objection, I'll spend the night in one of the huts and leave early in the morning. Sevanti, can you bring me some food? I don't want it for free; I have money with me.'

Sevanti sat with her hands on her cheeks for a while and

thought. Then she said, 'There is no food left in the village. Whatever there was has mostly been looted by the Bijapuris. The rest has been taken to the caves by the villagers.'

'In that case, let it be. I'll manage somehow. You should go back now. If you're late, your father will be worried.'

'So you'll stay here tonight?'

'Yes,' said Sadashiv.

Sevanti pointed to a hut near the temple and said, 'You can sleep in that one. That is ours.'

'All right.'

Sevanti got up. She closed the temple door, smiled and said, 'Shall I leave then?'

'Yes. And thank you.'

Sevanti left. Sadashiv watched her go until her slender form seemed to vanish into the moonlight. He sat for a while longer and then rose. He must finish his meal quickly and retire early. He'd have to leave at dawn. There was still two days' journey ahead.

A soft knocking on the door woke him from deep slumber. The moon was still in the sky. He listened for a while and then asked cautiously, 'Who is that?'

A gentle voice replied, 'It's me, Sevanti. Open the door.'

Sadashiv unbolted and opened the door. Sevanti was standing there, a smile on her lips and a bag in her hand.

Sadashiv was very surprised to see her. 'Why have you come back?'

Sevanti pointed to the bag and said, 'I've brought food for you. Where is your bag?'

His sense of surprise increased. He brought out his bag and gave it to her. 'Where did you get this food?'

As she transferred the food from her bag to his sack, Sevanti said, 'How does that matter? This should last you two days.'

Sadashiv was very moved by her help, and reminded once again of Kunku. He said hesitantly, 'How much shall I pay, Sevanti behin?'

Sevanti said, 'I don't want money. Are you going to come back this way?'

'Yes.'

'Then please buy some odds and ends for me from the city. I'll wait for you here every morning and evening.'

'Fine. If I return, I'll certainly bring it.'

'Now you catch some more sleep. There's still some time left for morning. Farewell.'

'Farewell.'

As she walked away, Sadashiv called out, 'Sevanti behin.'

Sevanti came back and stood by him, 'What is it?'

Sadashiv said, 'Tell the villagers that they can return to the village now. There's no fear any more.'

Sevanti said, 'But—the Bijapuri army will go back this way, won't they?'

Sadashiv said, 'No, they won't come back.'

CHAPTER FOUR

Sadashiv started his journey at the crack of dawn and rode all day. At noon, he had the food that Sevanti had brought—some dried peas, a few millet rotis and a ball of sugar-cane molasses—what more could be offered by those who have been ransacked and looted by the soldiers? Sadashiv was sure Sevanti had given up her own share to him, just as Kunku used to. He felt humbled by the generosity of such girls.

Despite the long day's relentless riding, there was no sign of the Bijapuri soldier on the lame horse. Where *were* the horse and its rider? Had he left them behind? Perhaps the lame horse couldn't go on any more and so the rider had fallen behind. But if, by some means, they'd gone ahead! It'd be disastrous if the

news reached the Bijapur court before Sadashiv could warn Shahji! The thought of what could happen to Shivaji's father made Sadashiv grit his teeth and dig his heel's into Sindhughotak's side.

At dusk, Sadashiv found himself in a place which was bare of all signs of human habitation. He found a place some distance away from the road where there was a large, leafy tree that he could sleep on. He let Sindhughotak loose to graze, and climbed up the branches. He straddled a thick branch with both his legs, hugged the trunk with both arms, placed his cheeks upon it and went to sleep.

In the dim moonlight, Sindhughotak grazed beneath the tree till he was satisfied. After that, he sat down and fell asleep.

The next day, as Sadashiv rode along, the scene by the road began to change. There were a few people on the road, and more villages, most inhabited. Sadashiv reckoned the city of Bijapur wasn't too far away.

In the afternoon, Sadashiv let Sindhughotak loose by the roadside and sat down to have his meal. As he ate, he suddenly saw a man coming up from behind him with a large flock of lambs. They were probably from a nearby village because Sadashiv hadn't passed them on his way. The brawny man seemed to be a Muslim, judging by his clothes, and he was playing on an oblique flute.

The man came up to Sadashiv and stopped playing. He gave a broad grin and asked, 'How's this, my friend, what are you doing here?'

Sadashiv smiled in response. He replied, 'I'm eating. I have to get going as soon as I finish. How far is Bijapur?'

The man said, 'You're going to Bijapur?'

'Yes.'

The man glanced at Sindhughotak. Then he said, 'I see that you have a horse. Still, you won't be able to reach Bijapur today. You'll have to spend the night on the way. You'll reach the city tomorrow afternoon.'

'Where are you going?'

The man guffawed loudly and said, 'I am also going to Bijapur. I'll reach the day after tomorrow.'

'Why are you taking so many lambs?'

'I'll cut them and sell them. I'm a butcher.' The man began to play his flute and walked away.

A little later, Sadashiv finished his meal, mounted Sindhughotak and set off again. After a short while, he ran into the flock of lambs and the flute-playing butcher again. As he passed by, the butcher called out, 'We'll meet again in Bijapur. If you want good meat, come to my shop. Everyone knows of Peerbaksh, the butcher. You won't get such good meat anywhere else.'

Sadashiv waved and trotted by.

That evening, Sadashiv reached a river. It wasn't very wide and neither was it too deep, but there were boats on it. On the other side, a boat laden with mounds of straw stood waiting. A heap of straw lay piled on the shore by the boat.

They crossed the river. The water came up to Sindhughotak's stomach. When he reached the other side, Sadashiv saw that there was no boatman in the boat. Probably there was a village close by.

Sadashiv thought for a while. It wouldn't be wise to go looking for the village. As a Maratha, he would not be welcome

in a village so close to Bijapur. Instead, he could probably spend the night in the haystack. The boatmen wouldn't be coming back so late in the evening, and he would be off early in the morning before they returned.

After unsaddling and unbridling Sidhughotak, Sadashiv ate dinner. Then he snuggled into the haystack and went to sleep. It was quite warm inside the haystack and Sadashiv was exhausted from riding on horseback for several days. He slept soundly.

He woke up as the sun's rays shot through the eastern sky. Climbing out of the haystack, he saw that mist lay thickly on the river like a muslin curtain. The horse stood a little way off by the water. It was later than he had planned to start.

Quickly, Sadashiv walked towards Sindhughotak. But as he came closer, he stopped in his tracks. This wasn't Sindhughotak! This was—this was that lame horse! There, it had a bandage on one knee.

Sadashiv sat down holding his head in his hands. It didn't take him long to figure it all out. At some point the rider of the lame horse had fallen behind him and then had followed him the whole way. He had crossed the river the previous night and and spotted Sidhughotak in the moonlight. Leaving his lame horse behind, he had made off with Sindhughotak.

Sadashiv felt like weeping. What was he to do now! He'd have to go to Bijapur on the lame horse. Perhaps he wouldn't reach before dusk. In the meantime, if the sultan heard the news—

But what else could he do? Sadashiv tied the blanket onto the lame horse, saddled and bridled it and swung on its back. They limped their way towards Bijapur.

CHAPTER FIVE

The road was undulating, rising into small hills and descending into valleys.

At about two in the afternoon, Sadashiv climbed up on a knoll. Before him, on the horizon, as if painted on the sky, were the outlines of the fortresses of Bijapur.

But it was early evening before he reached the walls.

The walls of the fortress were so high that if one stood at their base and attempted to see the top, one would get a bad crick in the neck. The gates were equally tall, but very wide. When Sadashiv reached, there wasn't much of a rush at the gate. There were a few guards on duty, and some travellers

entering or leaving. A group of camels was sitting outside the gate, and a bunch of donkeys stood with heavy loads on their backs. On one side, there were a few heavy iron hoops embedded in the wall and some six or seven horses were tied to them.

Sadashiv rode confidently to the gates. Immediately, two sentries barred his way with spears. One said, 'You cannot enter through these gates with a horse. Who are you?'

Sadashiv said, 'I've come on an urgent business from Poona.'

The sentry said, 'First you dismount and tie your horse, and then I'll listen to you.'

Sadashiv went to tie up the lame horse where the other horses were tethered. As he was about to do so, a familiar snort sounded near him. He turned around and—it was Sindhughotak! The man who had stolen Sindhughotak had entered the city! Sadashiv's heart did a little dance of joy at seeing Sindhughotak but he only had time to pat him affectionately before he went back to the gate.

The sentry asked, 'Who do you have business with in this city?'

Sadashiv said, 'My uncle Balwant Rao works under Commander Shahji Bhonsle. I have come with an urgent message for my uncle.'

The sentry said, 'But Commander Shahji Bhonsle is not here at this moment. He has gone to lay siege to the Gingee fort, along with the commander-in-chief, Mustafa Khan.'

'What! He is not here now!'

'No.'

'Where is Gingee fort? How far is it?'

The sentry pointed to a road on the right and said, 'Gingee fort is that way; it takes about four or five days.'

Sadashiv thought for a while. This wasn't bad at all. Even if the sultan got the news, Shahji was beyond his reach. There was still time.

He said, 'I must go. It is imperative that I get the message to my uncle. Okay, salaam.'

'Salaam.'

Sadashiv went back to the horses. He looked around, but no one was paying him any attention. He untied Sindhughotak, mounted on his back and galloped away in the direction that the sentry had pointed to.

CHAPTER SIX

Sadashiv rode on endlessly on that interminable road. The day ended, and night fell. Morning came again. And then it was night again. The moon waxed full and began to wane. The road to Gingee never seemed to end. Where *was* Gingee? How far away?

The villages along this road were prosperous. There had been no looting in these parts. They were hospitable, not suspicious, and gave Sadashiv food to eat and shelter for the night.

After a few days, Sadashiv asked at one village at a crossroad, 'How far is Gingee from here?'

They stared blankly, 'What is Gingee?'

'Which way did the Bijapuri army go?'

They pointed, 'That way.'

Sadashiv galloped away in that direction.

The road twisted and curved, heaved and fell as before; there were rivers here and there. The people who travelled that road seemed to be only going from one village to another. Very occasionally, a few merchants' camels would pass by, head raised high; sometimes a few bullock carts bearing goods ambled along making screeching sounds.

One evening, Sadashiv was riding along when he heard the sound of horses' hooves behind him. He turned around and saw two riders. From their clothes and the spears and swords they carried, he could tell they were soldiers of Bijapur. He moved aside and slowed down by the roadside.

In a short while, the Bijapuri riders' speedy horses caught up with Sadashiv. They slowed down and began to ride alongside Sadashiv. Their horses took one look at Sindhughotak and blew their nose contemptuously. The riders, too, slowed down glancing at Sindhughotak. From their uniforms, they seemed to be soldiers of higher rank—perhaps *havildars* or *jumladaars*.

One soldier suddenly laughed and said, 'Shobhan Mian, have you ever seen a horse with such a huge potbelly?'

Shobhan Mian laughed and shook his head. He raised his eyes and looked at Sadashiv. He said, 'Well, young man, what does your horse eat?'

Sadashiv said, 'He has grass.'

Both of them guffawed loudly, as if he'd said something very funny. The other soldier asked, 'Only grass? Don't you give

him grains?'

Sadashiv replied, 'No.'

Shobhan Mian said, 'Then perhaps it lives on air. That's why it has a blown-up belly. Does it fly?'

Sadashiv shook his head and said, 'No.'

Shobhan Mian said, 'In that case, it's not a *pakshiraj*. If it was, it'd have flown; what do you say, Haider Mian?'

Thus joking and bantering, the two soldiers rode alongside Sadashiv.

After riding some distance, Haider Mian asked Sadashiv, 'What's your name? Where are you going?'

'My name is Sadashiv. I'm going to Gingee.'

'You're also going to Gingee! What work do you have there?'

'I need to see my uncle.'

They both seemed quite surprised. Haider Mian looked at him suspiciously and asked, 'Where do you live? Where are you coming from?'

'From Poona.'

'From Poona!'

Haider Mian and Shobhan Mian exchanged glances. Then Haider Mian asked him harshly, 'Tell us frankly why and for whom you are going to Gingee, or we'll cut you up right here.'

Sadashiv said tearfully, 'I *was* about to tell you all—'

'Tell us. And no lies.'

Then Sadashiv narrated the tale that Shivaji had taught him, 'My uncle Balwant Rao Naik is a havildar in Commander Shahji Bhonsle's army. He is a rich man who has land and property in Poona. My uncle doesn't stay in Poona; he lives in Bijapur with Shahji's troops. My aunt lives in Poona with the children. I too

stay with them. A month ago, the dacoits of Shivaji's gang looted and ransacked my uncle's house. So I went to give the news to my uncle. When I went to Bijapur I heard that he has gone to Gingee with Shahji. That's why I'm also going to Gingee.'

The two soldiers looked at one another again. Shobhan Mian said, 'Do you know that Shahji is Shivaji's father?'

Sadashiv said, 'I know. But the father and son are not on talking terms.'

'Hmm.' The two conferred together in low voices so that Sadashiv could not make out a single word.

Then Shobhan Mian said to Sadashiv, 'We are also going to Gingee; so you come along with us.'

Sadashiv answered jubilantly, 'You're also going to Gingee? That's great. It's scary to travel alone. Are you soldiers of Bijapur?'

'Yes. Now follow us quietly.'

'Okay. How long would it take us to reach Gingee?'

'We should be there by tomorrow evening.'

The two of them galloped away swiftly. Sadashiv followed, trying to look delighted.

But there was no peace in his heart. This was a new problem now. If they saw through Sadashiv's story, it'll be the end of him. They must be envoys from the court of Bijapur, on their way to imprison Shahji. It was imperative he warned Shahji before they reached him.

It was almost dark when Sadashiv reached a village. The soldiers had arrived long before him. He saw their horses being massaged by two strapping men. The soldiers themselves were reclining on a cot in an open courtyard and smoking lazily from

a hubble-bubble. Many of the villagers squatted around the cot and there was general banter going on.

When he spotted Sadashiv, Shobhan Mian said, 'Hey, you're here at last! I thought your horse must have collapsed on the road and gone to sleep.'

Sadashiv dismounted and replied innocently, 'Not asleep. It's very tired, you see; that's why it can't run too fast. May I stay the night in this village?'

Haider Mian said, 'Yes, you may. We'll also stay here and so will you. Tomorrow morning we'll start together.'

Sadashiv understood that the two soldiers were not convinced by his story, and wanted to make sure they kept an eye on him. But he knew he had to reach Gingee before them, by whatever means possible.

Sadashiv had dinner with a friendly villager and slept in his courtyard. 'Three o'clock,' he said to himself firmly as he went to bed. As he fell asleep, he could still hear the two soldiers drinking, eating and making merry.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When he woke up, the half moon was in mid-sky. The village lay silent and still. Quietly, Sadashiv gathered his blanket, left the courtyard and went to where Sindhughotak was grazing by the roadside.

Sadashiv bridled the horse, tied the blanket onto his back and set off as silently as possible down the road. Once he had left the village behind, he let Sindhughotak have his head and galloped down the road. There were still a few hours before morning and in that time he wanted to cover as much distance as possible.

The day dawned, and the sun rose steadily up the sky. Sadashiv

rode on and on. There were a few wayside villages, but he didn't stop. The further he went, the more the mountains seemed to encircle him. The valleys were few and far between. The rocky road wound its way amidst the inclines and gradient of the mountains.

As he rode, he had his ears trained for sounds behind him. All through the day, he expected to hear hooves behind him. But the afternoon passed without any such alarm. Perhaps the soldiers had had a late start after their merrymaking last night.

In the late afternoon, Sadashiv reached a small clearing where Sindhughotak could graze. He set him loose and sat down to eat. The food in his bag was almost over. He ate as quickly as possible, and then they set off again.

Clouds were gathering amidst the mountain peaks—perhaps there'd be a shower soon. Gingee couldn't be too far away now. It was best if he reached Gingee before it rained.

When you are surrounded by hills, it is hard to see whether the sun had set. Though the sun was so low that Sadashiv hadn't seen it for a while, he could still see its rays reflected off the scattered clouds. But soon it would set. To be caught in the darkness amidst unknown mountains, with a shower threatening, was not a welcome propsect. Sadashiv urged Sindhughotak to go even faster. Where and how much further *was* Gingee?

It had obviously rained earlier in this area. The ground was wet and raindrops glistened on the leaves. Right ahead, below him, he could see a ravine in which nestled a tiny village. Sidhughotak began to gallop faster as he reached the downward slope.

Suddenly, there were noises beching him. Horses' hooves.

Sadashiv turned around—yes, the two Bijapuri soldiers were coming!

They caught up with Sadashiv just as he reached the little village. He turned Sidhughotak around to face their horses.

Haider Mian frowned and said, 'Why did you run away?'

Sadashiv's mind was working furiously. He answered in a surprised tone, 'Why would I run away? But if I left with you two, I'd have fallen behind. So I started early. Now we can all go on together.'

The soldiers didn't say anything more.

In the meantime, a few villagers came out onto the road at the sound of hooves. Shobhan Mian asked, 'How far is Gingee from here?'

One of them pointed ahead and said, 'The Gingee fort is right behind the mountain peak that you see there. It's about ten miles from here.'

Shobhan Mian said, 'Come on, then. We'll be able to reach Gingee before nightfall.' He wheeled his horse to face the road.

The villager said, 'You'll not be able to reach today.'

Shobhan Mian stopped. 'Why? Why can't we reach today?'

The villager said, 'Sir, the river has swollen.'

'What does that mean?'

'Sir, the river just beyond this village has overflowed its banks. There's been rain in the mountains, you see.'

'Is that so? Come, let's take a look.'

The three horses, their riders and some of the villagers went forward. As soon as they left the village, they could hear the sound of rushing water.

The river was not very wide—hardly forty yards or so. But

it was brimming with water, flowing along at great speed. The current looked strong. The water had overflowed the banks. It lapped down the road. On the far side, Sadashiv could see it emerge out of the muddy water.

Haider Mian stared at the flowing water for a while and asked, 'How deep is the water?'

One of them said, 'About three men deep.'

Shobhan Mian and Haider Mian looked at one another. 'What next?'

'This river can't be crossed. We have to stay here until the water subsides.'

'Who's to say how long it'll take for the water to subside.'

The villager said, 'If it doesn't rain any more, the water will subside overnight. Tomorrow morning you'll see it's only knee-deep.'

'Then let us spend the night in the village.'

An idea sprang into Sadashiv's mind. This was his chance. Shivaji had said Sindhughotak could carry three maunds of weight and cross Krishna-Godavari. Let the soldiers stay back here; he'd cross the river right now and reach Gingee.

Sadashiv said, 'I *must* go today. Or my uncle will kill me.'

Shobhan Mian said, 'Are you mad, boy! How will you cross this river?'

'If I can't cross it, I'll drown and die.' So saying, Sadashiv spurred Sindhughotak into the water.

All those gathered by the river were astounded. The villagers started screaming—'Gone! Gone! Now the youngster will drown!'

But Sindhughotak showed no signs of drowning. He swam

peacefully; his big potbelly keeping it afloat. The current was strong; strong enough to sweep away an elephant, Sadashiv thought nervously. But Sindhughotak seemed unperturbed. The force of the current made it impossible for him to cross straight. So Sindhughotak floated diagonally across, and then scrambled ashore somehow. He shook his whole great body vigorously to get rid of the water.

Under his breath, Sadashiv murmured, 'Jai Bhawani!'

The two soldiers looked on stupidly. How they had bantered about Sindhughotak's belly and taken pride in their speedy Arab steeds!

Sadashiv waved to the two soldiers on the opposite bank. 'I'm off,' he shouted, turned his horse and galloped off.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gingee fort stood like a crown on top of the mountain. It had seven perimeter walls at different levels. The wall that was right at the bottom went around for about five miles. One had to cross seven such walls in order to reach the core of the fort.

The Bijapuri commander-in-chief Mustafa Khan and his army had been laying siege to Gingee fort for six months. But they had not yet managed to break through even the first wall. So the whole army lay waiting outside. The commanders under Mustafa Khan, including Shahji, were getting impatient, as were the men. There was no sign of victory.

In the first light of dawn, the Bijapuri camp looked like a sea

of white clouds, as rows upon rows of tents gleamed palely. The soldiers slept on, the camp was still.

Shahji's tent, like that of all the senior officers, was towards the centre of the camp. Though a brave and ferocious soldier, Shahji was also a great connoisseur of dance and music. The previous night he'd stayed up late, watching a promising performer.

Shahji was not pleased to be woken up at the crack of dawn by the sound of an agrument outside his tent. He heard the sentry say, 'You can't see him now. He is sleeping. Go on; come back in a couple of hours' time.'

A young, Maratha voice was pleading with him, 'It's very important; delay could be disastrous. The commander's son, Shivaji Bhonsle, has sent me here.'

Shahji sat up in bed at these words.

The sentry said, 'Do you have any proof that you are a messenger of Shivaji?'

'I do, but you won't recognize it. I beg you, please say this to the commander—'

Shahji called out, 'Bring him in here to me.'

The sentry took Sadashiv inside the tent. The walls of the tent were covered with velvet, the ceiling was of brocade and the floor had a thick Persian carpet. Shahji sat on a muslin-covered bed. His eyes were red and he looked irritated.

When he saw Sadashiv, his brows remained creased. He asked abruptly, 'Who are you? Where are you from?'

'My name is Sadashiv. Shivaji has sent me. I have come from the Torna fort.'

Shahji said, 'Well, well! Show me the proof.'

'Here it is.' Sadashiv went up to him and showed him the copper amulet tied to his arm—'Jija-ma said you'll recognize me if I showed you this amulet.'

Shahji took a look at the amulet. His face changed. 'Go!' he ordered the guard.

As the guard left, his expression changed, and he gestured for Sadashiv to sit down. His voice was less harsh as he said, 'Jija has sent you! Shibba has sent you!'

Sadashiv sat on the edge of the bed.

In a gentle voice, Shahji said, 'Tell me, how are they? It's been so long since I saw them.'

Sadashiv said, 'They are all fine. Shivaji has sent me to you to give you an urgent message.'

'What is it?'

As concisely and as tersely as he could, Shivaji narrated the story of the seige by the Bjiapur army and how they had managed to save themselves. He described how Shivaji had been concerned about the consequences for his father, and had sent him to warn him. Shahji listened to every word without taking his eyes off Sadashiv's face.

When the tale was done, Shahji was silent for a few moments. Finally, he spoke in an emotional voice, 'Shibba! Jija! I haven't tried to find out how they are doing. Yet, they have so much love for me! Just to save me, they have sent word to me so far away!' He seemed overcome by remorse.

Sadashiv said, 'There isn't too much time. Any minute the people bearing the sultan's orders will be here.'

'Let them come!' said the commander defiantly. 'I'm ready to meet my fate. You go back to Shibba and tell him that he

shouldn't stop his war with Bijapur on my account. He should seize all the Bijapuri forts on Maratha soil and set up his own kingdom there. My life has been spent in slavery; Shibba should not bow down to anyone.'

Sadashiv said, 'But if the sultan has you killed?'

Shahji said, 'It's not that easy to kill Shahji Bhonsle! Even today there are at least five thousand soldiers loyal to me. But let that be. Tell Shibba not to worry about me. I'll look after myself. But that doesn't mean he can forget all about me.'

Sadashiv rose and said, 'I shall take your leave, then. I'll go and report all that you've said to Shibba Rao.'

Shahji held his hand and sat there looking at Sadashiv for a few moments. He said, 'What a boy you are! So young and so smart, so brave! All alone you've ventured into this enemy territory!' He patted him on the back. 'He who has brains and courage can conquer the world. All of you will succeed.'

Shahji picked up a fistful of gold coins from the table by his bed and handed it to Sadashiv, 'Here, this is for you, for the road. And here is a ring; give this to Jija. In case I never see her again, this will be my last gift to her.' He took a diamond ring off his own finger and handed it to Sadashiv.

Sadashiv tucked the ring and the gold coins into his waistband, touched Shahji's feet respectfully and left the tent.

CHAPTER NINE

Sadashiv's heart was filled with the joy of a task completed, his pocket was full of coins and a ring. Even on Sidhughatok, he seemed to fly.

As he was leaving the camp, Sadashiv glanced back once. The soldiers were waking up. Above them, the massive structure of the Gingee fort glittered in the morning sun.

Sadashiv rode on resolutely. It would take him another twelve or fourteen days to reach home. He was homesick, he missed Shivaji. Perhaps Sindhughotak sensed that he was going home too. Notwithstanding his potbelly, he galloped away cheerfully.

There were many thoughts rushing through Sadashiv's head,

now that the tension was over. He was dying to see Shivaji and to slip the ring on to Jijabai's finger. But at the same time, he remembered little Sevanti, who had brought him food and asked him to get her something from the city. Bijapur was supposed to be the biggest city in southern India—and Sadashiv had never seen a city before. If that delayed his homecoming by a few hours, there was no harm. The real work was already done.

What would he buy for Sevanti? Something really expensive—a vermilion-red sari, silver bangles and silver armlets. Sadashiv felt rich, now that his pocket was full of gold coins.

Thinking of Sevanti made him think of Kunku. Kunku, who now had no idea where he was. He wanted to buy something for her too. What did it matter if he did not know when he would see her next? He would buy and keep it and then when he saw her next . . .

What would he buy for Kunku? It would have to be something really special. A sari? No. Jewellery? Perhaps he should buy a ring for her, a gold ring! Shahji had given a ring for Jijabai; he too would give Kunku a ring—

The sound of horses' hooves ahead of him broke into Sadashiv's reverie. He looked ahead. Shobhan Mian and Haider Mian had crossed the river at last.

As they came close, the soldiers reined in their horses. Haider Mian looked sharply at Sadashiv and asked in a hard voice, 'How is it that you're going back so soon?'

In a tearful voice Sadashiv said, 'My uncle is dead. He died fighting. So I'm rushing to give the news to my aunt. Has the water subsided?'

'Yes.'

'Okay then, farewell.'

Sadashiv didn't glance back as he rode on briskly. He could feel the two soldiers glaring at his back for some time.

CHAPTER TEN

Sadashiv returned exactly a month after he had left Torna fort. The return journey was unexciting. But he did get to see the city of Bijapur.

What a city! All around there were colourful minarets and domes, two- and three-storeyed houses. The roads were packed with elephants, horses and chariots of noblemen. The markets were dazzling—piles of fruits and flowers, metres of fabric, boxes upon boxes of gems and jewels.

Sadashiv bought a scarlet sari, and silver bangles and armlets for Sevanti. He also bought a gold ring for Kunku, but he hid it so that no one could see it. He spent that night at a travellers'

rest home in Bijapur and left the city in the morning.

Now it was back home. On the way, he noticed that people were returning to the villages. Everyone had got to know that the Bijapuri army would not return that way.

One evening, as Sadashiv was riding along, he heard a gentle voice call out, 'Sadashiv bhai!'

Sevanti! She said she would wait by the roadside, behind a tree, every day. 'Why did you take so long?' she said. 'I thought you're not going to come back.'

Sadashiv said, 'How could I go away without meeting you, Sevanti. I was just thinking that your village must be here somewhere, but I wasn't very sure. Thank goodness you called me!'

The villagers were back in their homes now. Sevanti took Sadashiv into the village, where everyone welcomed him. Sevanti was thrilled with her gifts.

Sadashiv spent the night in the village. The next day at dawn, he said goodbye to everyone, mounted Sindhughotak and headed back. Now it was straight to Torna fort! Shibba Rao! Jija-ma!

Two days later, when Sadashiv came to the gates of Torna fort, the sun was setting in the west. Shivaji himself opened the gates and came out to welcome him. Behind him were all the people of the fort.

Sadashiv jumped off the horse. Shivaji placed his hand on Sadashiv's shoulder and asked, 'Mission accomplished?'

Sadashiv said, 'Accomplished!'

Shivaji hugged Sadashiv. 'Bravo! From this day on you are Sirdar Sadashiv!'

Everyone assembled on the terrace to listen to Sadashiv's

adventures. When they heard that Shahji had commanded his son to establish a Maratha kingdom, everyone cheered. Jijabai's eyes glistened with joy.

Sadashiv took out the diamond ring, gave it to Jijabai and said, 'Here you are, Jija-ma, the commander sent this ring for you.'

Jijabai took the ring in her hands. Her eyes filled with tears as she recognized it. She stood up and took Sadashiv by the hand. 'That's enough!' she said. 'Hear the rest tomorrow. The poor thing has grown so thin without food for a whole month. Come, Sadashiv.'

And she led him downstairs for a fabulous meal.

PART IV

THE SECRET MESSAGE

CHAPTER ONE

A whole year had passed since Sadashiv ran away from his village, taking Vithhal Patil's horse with him. Many things had happened in this one year: apart from repulsing the Bijapuri troops with gunpowder and going to Gingee to warn Shahji, Sadashiv had also been initiated into battle and fought in a few minor battles. He was now an experienced soldier and one of the special bodyguards assigned to protect Shivaji. But he had one regret still: he was yet to grow a proper moustache.

Meanwhile, summer was almost over and the rains would soon be here. Shivaji was busy with many things. He spent most of his days at the Torna fort. The new fort, Raigarh, was

coming up next to the Torna fort and Shivaji was overseeing its construction personally. He also had to go to Poona sometimes. Along with the other bodyguards, Sadashiv also accompanied him. In Poona, various kinds of weapons, cannon balls, coats of arm and swords were being made by thousands of artisans, and Shivaji supervised it all personally.

Jijabai usually stayed back in Torna. When he was there, Sadashiv stayed in a tiny room in a corner of Jijabai's chambers. His bed was made on the granite floor and his weapons were arranged on the sandstone walls. Sometimes Jijabai came in and cleaned up his room. She was really fond of Sadashiv.

When Shivaji joked about it—'Sadashiv is Ma's baby boy'—Sadashiv felt abashed and Jijabai only smiled.

One morning, the fort was full of bustle. Shivaji was going to Poona that night, and he would be accompanied by fifty soldiers. Everyone was busy with their chores: some were massaging their horse, some sharpening their weapons, and others washing their clothes and spreading them out to dry. No one knew how long they'd have to stay in Poona. They could even run into the enemy on the way and there could be a battle—Har Har Mahadeo!

Sadashiv was one of the fifty who was supposed to go with Shivaji. He woke up at dawn and cleaned his sword and shield. After that, he went into the stable to groom his horse. Vithhal Patil's horse—that emaciated apology of a beast on whose back Sadashiv had left the village—had become strong and powerful in this one year. The good food and regular grooming had improved it almost beyond recognition. Sadashiv named him Pakshiraj.

Meanwhile, Jijabai had finished her morning prayers. She went into Shivaji's room and found it empty. Shivaji was in the treasury, discussing the money that had to be taken to Poona. Jijabai rolled up the mattress, took a broom and swept the room. Once it was done, she went into Sadashiv's room.

Sadashiv's room was also empty. In one corner, the mattress was rolled up clumsily. Jijabai smiled at the clumsy effort. She swept the floor clean and then went to roll up the mattress properly.

As she straightened the sheets, a shiny object rolled out from under the pillow and hit the floor with a metallic sound. Jijabai picked it up. It was a ring—a gold ring! She turned the ring around in her hand and a small smile played around her lips. She tied the ring into one end of her sari and came back to her own room.

As Sadashiv was leaving the stables after feeding Pakshiraj, he suddenly remembered—Oh dear! The ring was still under his pillow! Jijabai would come in to clean his room and if she found the ring! He had hidden it away since he had bought it for Kunku in Bijapur, and never mentioned it to anyone.

Sadashiv ran to his room. It was just as he thought. Jijabai had rolled up the mattress and cleaned the room in his absence. He unrolled his bedding quickly and found the ring gone! Oh, no! Had Jijabai found it and—

At this moment, a maid came to the door. 'Sadashiv bhai, Jija-ma has sent for you.'

Sadashiv followed the maid sheepishly to Jijabai's room. Jijabai was sitting there with a plate of food. When she saw him, she greeted him warmly. 'You boys will go to Poona tonight

and there's no telling when you'll return. So I made some motichoor laddus for you. Come and eat.'

Sadashiv sat down to eat. Jijabai didn't mention the ring, but talked airily about other things. Sadashiv began to hope she had not found the ring, that after all it had fallen in some corner of his room.

After a while, Jijabai said, 'Sadashiv, it's more than a year since you came here. Don't you feel like going and seeing your near and dear ones?'

Sadashiv said glumly, 'Jija-ma, I don't have any near and dear ones in the village, as you well know.'

'Why, you have your uncle and aunt.'

'They don't love me. Everyone conspired to throw me out of the village.'

'There's no one in the village who loves you?'

'No one,' Sadashiv heaved a deep sigh.

Jijabai untied the ring from the corner of her sari, held it out to him and asked, 'Then who did you buy this for?'

Sadashiv was speechless. He hung his head and racked his brains for a reply.

'You went to Bijapur on your way back from Gingee and bought gifts for Sevanti. Is that when you bought this ring?'

Sadashiv nodded.

Jijabai asked, 'Who is it for?'

Sadashiv could not lie to Jijabai. In a feeble voice, he said, 'For Kunku.'

Jijabai smiled. 'Who is Kunku? A girl in your village?'

'Yes. She is Vithhal Patil's daughter.'

Jijabai said, 'Hmm. Now tell me everything—how old is

she, what is she like . . .'

Sadashiv felt very self-conscious talking about Kunku. But he couldn't refuse to answer Jija-ma's questions. Slowly and tentatively, he began to speak. But as he spoke, his hesitation vanished and he spoke eloquently of how bright and well-informed Kunku was, and how kind she had been to an orphan boy everyone else hated. 'When the village elders ordered me to leave the village, it was Kunku who advised me to go and join Shibba Rao's band. She said, "You go to Shivaji. He is not a bandit. One day he will rule the land."'

Jijabai was delighted with all that she heard. She said, 'Kunku sounds like a wonderful girl. I am glad you bought this ring for her. But when will you give it to her? Go to the village and give it to her.'

'How can I go, Jija-ma? I have to go to Poona today with Shibba Rao. There's so much work to do. Until the rains come, there's no time at all. And once the monsoon comes, there'll be water all around. Will I be able to go then?'

Jijabai said, 'Fine, I'll speak to Shibba.'

Sadashiv was very embarassed. 'No, Jija-ma, you will not say anything to Shibba Rao. When he will give me leave himself, I'll go to my village then.'

Jijabai laughed. 'All right, you don't have to worry about all that. Now you come on, there are still some laddus left on the plate.'

It was past one that night when Shivaji and his fifty men left the fort on horseback. A little later, the waning moon would rise and it would be easy for them to find their way. Shivaji preferred travelling at night. These were troubled times and it

wasn't safe to travel in the day unless one had large troops with them.

Shivaji led the men though familiar roads in the dark until the sickle moon rose and cast a wan light on their path. The long row of men looked like a mountain snake slithering over the hills and valleys. They reached Poona at dawn.

In those days, Poona was still a large village. Most of the houses had thatched roofs, and there were only a few houses which were built of brick. In the centre stood the old family home of Shahji Bhonsle—a huge mansion with many courtyards. Shahji had left his lands, wife and son in the care of a Brahmin called Dadoji Kondadev when he went away to fight for the sultan of Bijapur. After Dadoji Kondadev's recent death, Shivaji was free to try to bring all of Maharashtra under his control.

Poona was the centre of Shivaji's activities, though he spent most of his time at Torna fort. There were around two thousand soldiers here who were loyal to Shivaji. When the rains came and there were no more battles to be fought; these soldiers went back to work in their fields. When the monsoon ended, on the day of Dushhera, they came back to fight again. These soldiers lived in tents around Shahji's mansion.

When they reached Poona, the group went to the mansion where they were to stay. At the news of Shivaji's arrival, the soldiers in Poona began to polish their weapons in excited anticipation of battle. While Shivaji was in Torna, theirs was an uneventful life, and they were always delighted when he arrived in Poona.

But Shivaji showed no signs of planning battles. He divided

his time between doing the rounds of the blacksmiths and of the gunpowder factory. The remaining time was spent in discussions with subordinate officers. There was something brewing, his men thought hopefully, but it hadn't come out in the open.

Sadashiv always stayed close to Shivaji, but the latter was so immersed in his work that he hardly seemed to notice the boy. Despite his protests to Jijabai, Sadashiv had secretly hoped she would mention his need to visit Dongarhpur, but now felt she had actually kept her word and not mentioned it!

A few days later, Shivaji sent for Sadashiv in the afternoon. He was in his office, reclining on a divan and dictating a letter which his secretary was writing down. Sadashiv went and stood by the divan silently.

Once the letter was written and sealed, Shivaji gestured for the secretary to leave the room. When they were alone, Shivaji smiled at Sadashiv. 'Well, I hear from Ma that you wish to go to your village.'

Oh, so Jija-ma *had* spoken to him about it! Sadashiv said, 'If you give me leave, Shibba Rao, I'll go for a few days.'

Shivaji said, 'Aren't you from Dongarhpur? How far is that from Poona?'

'About sixty miles to the north.'

'That's good. Go on. When will you return?'

'I can be back in three or four days. When shall I leave?'

'Today. The sooner you go the sooner you'll return.'

'All right.'

Sadashiv was about to leave when Shivaji called him back, 'Do you know the Chakon fort?'

Sadashiv said, 'I've heard the name. It's somewhere to the north of Poona.'

'Yes. It's not too far. If you leave right away, you should be there by dusk. You'll have to go a little to the west off the road to your village. I'll tell you the way.'

'Do you have some work for me in Chakon fort?'

'Yes. This letter has to be delivered to Firangji Narsala, the chief of security in Chakon fort. Now listen to me carefully. This is a very important letter and if it falls into the hands of anyone other than Firangji, there'd be a disaster. You must go to Chakon fort and carefully ask about Firangji. When you get to meet him, give him some signal to indicate that you are my man. If he mentions Junnargarh, give the letter to him. Junnargarh! Will you remember that?'

Sadashiv said, 'I'll remember, Shibba Rao. I've heard from Jija-ma that you were born in the Shivner village, close to the Junnargarh fort.'

Shivaji laughed. 'That's right. Now listen to me. After giving the letter to Firangji you'll go on to your village. On your way back, you must go to Chakon fort once again. Okay?'

Sadashiv repeated the instructions. 'I'll go to Chakon fort, make a signal that I am your man; when Firangji Narsala mentions Junnargarh, hand the letter to him and not to anyone else. After that, I'll go to my village and on my way back I must go to Chakon fort once again. Is that all?'

'Yes, that is all.' Shivaji explained the route to Chakon fort to him and gave him the letter.

Sadashiv took the letter and carefully tucked it inside his waistband. He was about to leave when he suddenly

remembered something. A little sheepishly, he said, 'Shibba Rao, I have a favour to ask. Please lend me one of your horses.'

Shivaji asked, 'Why, what's the matter with your own horse? Is it sick?'

Sadashiv scratched his head and replied, 'No, my horse is doing fine, but—'

'But what? Why won't you take your own horse?'

Sadashiv was silent.

Shivaji laughed out loud, 'Oh, I get it! You stole someone's horse from the village, right?'

'Vithhal Patil's. I didn't really steal it; the horse was half-dead from starvation—'

Shivaji laughed a little more. He said, 'Go to my stable and take any horse that you like. And if the Patil in your village makes a fuss, pay him off for his horse.'

In a trice, Sadashiv got dressed, tucked his sword into his waistband and set off on horseback. The horse he had chosen was black in colour, sleek and slim, and as fleet as the wind.

Sadashiv rode north. Chakon fort was about twenty miles from Poona and he was sure to be there before sunset. The path was easy—there were not as many hills to the north of Poona as there were to the west and south. Most of the rivers and streams were dry at the end of summer, and he was sure he could easily wade across them.

He was going to Dongarhpur again! Sadashiv was flying with joy. Everyone in the village hated him, but Kunku was his friend and he'd give the ring to her. Since Jija-ma had returned the ring to him, he had been wearing it around his neck on a string, hidden under his shirt. He was sure Kunku would be thrilled to

see him. But would Vithhal Patil?

Anyway, first he had to think about Chakon fort. He knew that Shivaji wanted to bring all the forts in Maharashtra—there were hundreds and hundreds—under his control. Chakon fort was once a part of Shahji's jagir and now it was independent. Perhaps he wanted to seize it back. It really shouldn't be too difficult reaching the letter to Firangji Narsala. Sadashiv began to plan as he rode along.

Gradually, the sun leaned to the west and Chakon fort became visible on the horizon.

The fort was built securely on a plateau and surrounded by high walls. Outside the fort, a little way off, lay a small hamlet. In the falling light of day, the hay-thatched huts could be seen.

When Sadashiv reached the gates of the fort, the sun was about to set. Five guard soldiers stood in a line in front of the gate. They had swords in their waistbands and spears in their hand. As Sadashiv approached, one of them roared, 'Beware!'

Sadashiv reined in his horse. He said, 'Har Har Mahadeo,' looking at each face in turn.

They looked back at him with suspicion and hatred. The leader of the guards said brusquely, 'What do you want?'

Sadashiv dismounted and said meekly, 'I'm a soldier and I'm looking for work. I'd like to meet your security chief.'

'Where are you from?'

'I've really travelled a lot. First I was with the Bijapuris; but with monsoon approaching, they dismissed me. I went to Shivaji in Poona then, but he also sent me away and asked me to come after the rains. So, I've come here. Aren't you hiring soldiers in the fort?'

'No, we are not.'

Sadashiv looked disappointed and stood silently for a while. Then he said, 'It's almost night; where will I go now? Will you let me stay in the fort tonight? I'll leave tomorrow morning.'

'No. We have orders not to let strangers stay in the fort.'

They stood and stared at him, and he stared back. After a while, a bell clanged, which was obviously some kind of signal. The five guards stepped back into the fort and shut the gates with a loud clang.

Sadashiv stood despondently for a little longer. Then he walked away slowly, leading the horse. He had failed to do his work and he was fated to spend the night under a tree.

There was a leafless tree in one spot between the fort and the hamlet. Sadashiv tied his horse to that tree and sat down wearily upon a chunk of stone. He began to ponder upon his next course of action.

The villagers in the hamlet had seen him, but no one approached him. It was dusk and everyone was busy cooking dinner or preparing fodder for their cattle. Nobody was curious about an unknown soldier. They had seen soldiers all their lives and wherever there were soldiers, there was trouble.

Darkness was rolling in. Sadashiv raised his eyes and saw the silent, sandy form of Chakon fort raising its head into the sky. Not a single lamp was lit. The fort looked devoid of human life, except for the guards on the parapet who stood like nocturnal birds of prey.

The germ of an idea began to take shape in Sadashiv's head. The men in the fort were very suspicious. They won't let him meet Firangji directly. Shivaji had mentioned that he'd have to

let Firangji know that Shivaji's messenger was waiting to see him . . . If he couldn't meet the man, how else could he signal to him?

Firangji was the security chief. Surely he climbed up to the terrace at night to check on whether the watch was being kept in a proper manner. Sometimes the guards would lean against the parapet and catch a quick nap, so the chief always had to be careful. But for his plan to work, he would need . . .

Suddenly, a stupid sort of laugh startled Sadashiv. He turned around. A man had come up to him silently. He was quite young, just a little older than Sadashiv. He was very emaciated and had the shadow of a moustache and beard on his face. His hair was tangled and matted and his eyes shone bright. The moment Sadashiv turned towards him, he bared his huge teeth and smiled, 'My name is Sahasrabudhhi.'

Sadashiv said, 'Really! Sahasrabudhhi—then you must be very intelligent. Do you live in this village?'

Sahasrabudhhi said, 'Yes. The villagers call me crazy but I am not mad. I am very intelligent and I know *everything*.'

It was clear to Sadashiv that the man was a halfwit. There was such a halfwit in almost every village and in this village it happened to be Sahasrabudhhi.

He laughed and said, 'In that case you are my friend. Come, sit here. I am not that intelligent; just look at me, roaming around aimlessly on horseback.'

Sahasrabudhhi sat down beside Sadashiv quite happily. He said, 'Aren't you a soldier? You have a sword, and a horse. Didn't they let you into the fort?'

Sadashiv said, 'No. How did you know that?'

Sahasrabudhhi shook his head from right to left. 'I know everything. I know about the fort, I know about the village. The old moneylender of the village, Bapurao Mahajan, has poisoned his wife to death.'

'Is that so? Why?'

'Because he wants to marry again. It's very expensive to feed two wives and so he killed the old one and is going to marry a new one.'

'Really! He seems to be an intelligent man. In your village everyone seems to be very bright.'

'But no one is as bright as I! I am *Sahasrabudhhi*.'

'True, that's very true. Tell me, my friend, who is the master of Chakon fort?'

'You don't know that? There are three masters of the fort: there is the havildar, there's the *sar-i-naubat* (security chief) and the *sabnis*. None of them can stand the other and they are always at each other's throats.'

'Is that so? How do you know that they're always fighting? Have you been to the fort?'

'No, they don't allow anyone into the fort. I have overheard the village elders talking among themselves. I know everything.'

Sadashiv now had a better idea of the difficulty of his task. Of the three men in charge of the fort, Shivaji was secretly communicating with just one. The other two were in the dark on this matter, but they must be suspicious of Firangji. This made reaching Shivaji's letter to him all the more difficult. But the job must be done, whatever it took.

It was dark by now. Sadashiv could only see the gleam of Sahasrabudhhi's large white teeth. He said, 'Sahasrabudhhi, you

are very bright and you do know everything. Will you do me a favour?'

Sahasrabudhhi was used to being called crazy and being kicked around. At this praise, he was willing to do anything for his new friend. He said, 'I'll do whatever you say, I can do everything.'

Sadashiv said, 'I am very hungry. The horse has also eaten nothing all day long. Can you bring some millet flour and some coal from the village? I'll pay for it.'

Sahasrabudhhi jumped up and said, 'Certainly. I'll get it from the grocer, Chintamani. Give me the money.'

Sadashiv gave him a few paise. 'Bring a lot of coal because I'll have to make some food for the horse as well. Besides, we'll need salt, water—'

'Yes, yes, I'll get everything, don't worry.' Sahasrabudhhi vanished into the night.

Sadashiv sat staring at the hamlet. A few lamps were lit in the village. The sound of bells in the temple could be heard. In a short while, the village folk would finish their meal, blow out the lamps and go to sleep. Sadashiv began to worry. What if Sahasrabudhhi didn't come back? He wouldn't mind starving for one night, but the coal was absolutely urgent. If he didn't get the coal—

In the darkness, something large loomed up. A huge animal, as big as a horse, was lumbering towards Sadashiv, panting as it came up.

Sadashiv stood up with his hand on his sword.

Then he began to laugh out loud. It wasn't an animal, but Sahasrabudhhi. He had a huge basket of coal on his head, a big

sack of millet flour on his back and an earthen pot full of water on his waist.

Sadashiv helped him with his load. 'I thought you were a horse. You'll have your meal with me tonight, all right?'

Sahasrabudhhi gave a huge grin and said, 'Fine. Wait, let me get the salt, chillies and the chutney. The grocer's wife said she'll give me all that.'

'Also, bring an earthen vessel.'

'All right.'

Sahasrabudhhi ran down and returned in a short while bearing all he had been asked to get.

Sadashiv poured some water into the earthen vessel and gave it to the horse to drink. Then he started lighting the fire. He placed a handful of coal on the ground and struck up some sparks with flint stones. In the light of the coal fire, the darkness around was dispelled to some extent.

Sadashiv said, 'Sahasrabudhhi, do you know how to make rotis?'

Sahasrabuddhi said, 'I certainly do.'

'Then you make the rotis and I'll do something interesting here.'

'What will you do?'

'Wait and watch.'

Sahasrabudhhi kneaded the dough and began to make the rotis. Sadashiv took coal in both his hands and began to lay it out on the ground. He made one straight line. From the middle of the line, he extended a horizontal line a short way across, and two more vertical lines leading up from either end of the horizontal line. Once it was arranged, Sadashiv lit it up.

Sahasrabudhhi was watching as he made the rotis and he said, 'Hey, that's a *trishul*.'

Sadashiv said, 'Yes, you see, I'm a devotee of Shiva and so I've made Shiva's trishul.'

Sahasrabudhhi said, 'That's very interesting!'

Sadashiv glanced towards the fort once. He was sure the fiery trishul would be visible from the terrace. Would Firangji see it? If he saw it, would he get the message?

The night wore on. The horse grew restless. Once the rotis were ready, Sadashiv let the horse have its fill and then sat down to have his meal with Sahasrabudhhi.

Dinner comprised of thick rotis, salt and a sweet-and-sour chutney made with tamarind and other fruits. The two of them ate heartily.

It was now time to sleep. Sadashiv took the blanket from the back of his horse and spread it on the ground.

Sahasrabudhhi said, 'Let me also sleep here tonight.'

Sadashiv was a little taken aback. 'Well—go ahead.'

The two of them lay down side by side. Sadashiv began to think: if someone came from the fort at night, it'd be a little awkward. Sahasrabudhhi would come to know and perhaps he'll talk in the village. What could he do? It was imperative that he sent Sahasrabudhhi away.

Sadashiv looked at the quiet stars in the sky. After a while, he asked, 'Sahasrabudhhi, who do you have at home?'

Sahasrabudhhi said, 'Just my old granny. Once she dies, I'll have no one.'

'If you don't return home at night, perhaps your granny will worry about you.'

'That old fogey has no worries. As soon as the sun sets, she stuffs herself on opium and sleeps like a log.'

Realizing this wouldn't work, Sadashiv was silent for a few moments. Suddenly, he said, 'Sahasrabudhhi, do you believe in ghosts?'

'Ghosts!' Sahasrabudhhi sat up straight, 'I have heard the village elders talk about ghosts, but I have never seen one.'

Sadashiv said, 'Those who sleep indoors at night don't really get to see ghosts too often. But if you slept outdoors, you'd have seen them often.'

'Really! Have you seen them?'

'Many times. I'm a soldier and at wartimes I have to sleep outdoors. Once, late in the night, I woke up suddenly and found a ghost leaning over my face.'

'Oh my god! What did you do then?'

'What could I do? I took the name of Ram. After doing that for a long time, the ghost left.'

Sahasrabudhhi inched a little closer to Sadashiv. There was a few moments' silence. Then Sahasrabudhhi said, trying to sound brave, 'There are no ghosts around our village. If there were any, I'd have seen them.'

Sadashiv said, 'If you die by foul play, you become a ghost. You were saying that Bapurao, the moneylender, has poisoned his wife. I'm sure the wife has turned into a witch and is roaming around!'

Sahasrabudhhi began to tremble violently. He grabbed Sadashiv and said, 'What will I do now! Let me go and lie down indoors with that old geyser. But how will I go alone?'

Sadashiv said, 'Take god's name and make a dash for it. Don't

be afraid. Come back tomorrow morning.'

Sahasrabudhhi stood up, shivering, muttered something under his breath and scooted towards the village.

Sadashiv got up and put some more coals into the fiery trishul. The fire burnt brighter. He came back and lay down again.

The stars in the sky were slowly moving to the west . . . Sahasrabudhhi must have gone and slept beside his old granny by now. Were there really ghosts? Sadashiv had never seen them, but he'd heard a lot about them . . .

He fell asleep. He didn't know how long he slept, but he dreamt that a ghost was leaning over his face—

Sadashiv opened his eyes and said, 'Who are you?'

He could only see a head in the dark and hear the sound of breathing. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the fiery trishul had turned to ashes.

The head moved away. A voice muttered, 'I am from Junnargarh.'

Sadashiv sat up. 'Firangji Narsala?'

'Yes.'

'I am a messenger from Shivaji. How did you know I was here? Did the guards inform you?'

'No. They just said a soldier came looking for work. Soldiers do that during the monsoon and so I didn't suspect anything. But at one o'clock in the night when I climbed up to the terrace, I saw the trishul burning. That's when I realized, Shiva's trishul, meaning Shivaji.'

Sadashiv was delighted. His plan worked. He asked, 'How did you leave the fort?'

'I threw down a rope from the window of my room. My

room is on the other side of the fort, against the parapet walls and you can't see your trishul from there. I saw it only because I went up to the terrace. I am the security chief of the fort, but two of my comrades keep me under constant surveillance. If they come to know that I am in touch with Shivaji, they'll have me killed instantly. This fort is rightfully Shivaji's and I want to return it to him, but they won't let me. So, I have to work in complete secrecy.' Firangji stopped. Then he said, 'Anyway, let that be for now. I have to return immediately. What is the message that Shivaji has sent?'

'He's given a letter. Here it is.'

Neither one saw the other; their hands met in the dark. Firangji took the letter and said, 'I'll go back now. Will you be here tomorrow?'

Sadashiv said, 'Shivaji hasn't ordered me to stay. I'll leave tomorrow morning.'

There was no sound after that. Sadashiv called cautiously, 'Firangji!'

There was no answer. Firangji had left silently.

Well, the task assigned by Shivaji was done. The next morning he would set off for his village with an easy mind. Sadashiv went back to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

The sound of trumpets, clarinets and drums woke Sadashiv. The sun hadn't risen yet, but the village was all in a bustle. Sadashiv rubbed his eyes, sat up and saw Sahasrabuddi running towards him.

Sahasrabudhhi came and sat down. He asked eagerly, 'Did the ghost come last night?'

Sadashiv said, 'Yes, it did. Why is there such a ruckus in the village?'

Sahasrabudhhi said, 'Oh, that's nothing. It's Bapurao, the moneylender, setting off to marry. So, the ghost came! What did you do?'

'I took Shiva's name and it left.'

'Shiva's name! But aren't you supposed to take Ram's name if you want to drive away ghosts?'

'Shiva's name also works and even the biggest of them run away. Where is the moneylender going to get married?'

'Oh, very far away. There's a village called Dongarhpur—that's where.'

Sadashiv was startled. Dongarhpur! Whom was he going to marry over there? He asked, 'Whose daughter is he going to marry in Dongarhpur?'

'Who knows? Bapurao, the moneylender, is very clever. He doesn't tell anybody anything.'

'Hmm. But why is he going so far away when there are so many villages close by?'

'In all the nearby villages everyone has come to know that he has poisoned his first wife and so no one wants to marry their daughter to him.'

Sadashiv got up. No more idling. He must find out whose daughter the moneylender was going to wed.

In the meantime, the groom's procession had left the village. The groom rode on horseback and everyone else walked along all around him. They left the village and began to go north. The sounds of their cymbals, flutes and drums began to recede.

Sadashiv tied the blanket on to the horse and collected the leftover food from the previous night. He placed his hand on Sahasrabudhhi's back and said, 'Sahasrabudhhi, my friend, I have to go now.'

Sahasrabudhhi said, 'Where will you go?'

'Far away. But I'll return the same way. We'll meet again.'

'Fine.'

Sadashiv leapt onto his horse and galloped north.

After a short while, he caught up with the groom's party. The music was dwindling away. There were five or six men in the group, and they were quite elderly. They looked like they were employed by the moneylender. When they heard the sounds of Sadashiv's horse, they moved to the side of the road.

Sadashiv reined in his horse, laughed and said, 'Why did you stop the music? Come on, let's travel together for a little while.'

Bapurao, the moneylender, sat on a gangly little horse. He had a red turban on his head and a rusty sword dangled from his waist. He looked like a rascal. He looked at Sadashiv suspiciously and said, 'You're a soldier and you spent the night in the field outside the village yesterday?'

Sadashiv said, 'Yes. I came here looking for work. It didn't work out at the Chakon fort and so I'm going back.'

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to Junnargarh. Let's see if I get some work there.'

The wedding party began to move again and Sadashiv went along, keeping pace with them. After going some distance he glanced at the moneylender, smiled a little and said, 'Seth, from your clothes and preparations I can tell that you are going to get married. Am I right?'

The moneylender didn't reply and merely looked at Sadashiv with suspicious eyes.

One of the groom's party spoke up, 'There's no harm in telling a soldier. He is not one of the vile people from the village who'll go and wreck the marriage negotiations. Yes, soldier, sethji's first wife has died and so he is going to marry again.'

Sadashiv said, 'Good, good. I can see that the seth is a fortunate man. There's a saying that the fortunate man's wife dies and the unfortunate man's horse. So, where is the wedding?'

The groom's friend said, 'Oh, it's very far away. We'll travel all of today and tomorrow evening we'll reach the place. Have you heard of Dongarhpur village?'

Sadashiv said, 'Oh, yes, I have. I even know of some people there, Vithhal Patil—'

The man smiled and said, 'Yes, it is Vithhal Patil's daughter that sethji is marrying.'

Sadashiv turned white. There'd been a nagging suspicion in his mind from the time he had heard of this wedding, and now it was confirmed. Vithhal Patil's daughter could only mean Kunku, since Vithhal Patil had no other daughter.

Sadashiv looked at the moneylender. This doddering scoundrel was going to marry Kunku. The vile so-and-so. After killing one wife, now he was off to marry Kunku! Blood rushed to his head and he felt like drawing his sword and chopping off the old fogey's head in one sweep.

But no, he must keep his head cool and make his plans carefully. Shivaji didn't like his men to fight and quarrel. Besides, they were six men armed with lathis, swords and spears, and Sadashiv was alone. And more importantly, he shouldn't kill a man whose only crime was that he was going to marry Kunku.

He must reach Dongarhpur before the wedding party and break off the wedding. He was sure Vithhal Patil was greedy for money and so he'd fixed the match with the old moneylender. But when he came to know that the man had

already killed his first wife, he'd—

Sadashiv forced a smile onto his lips and said, 'Well, well, that's great. All right, seth, I'll be off. If I don't hurry, I won't be able to reach Junnargarh by dusk.'

He galloped away.

This was not the road that Sadashiv had taken a year earlier when he had left the village to go to Poona. That road had wound its way through mountains and hills. The road ahead was flat as far into the horizon as he could see. In the east was a range of small hills. That was the direction in which his village lay.

The summer day wore on. When Sadashiv reached the range of hills, the sun was right overhead. Ahead, to both left and right, the hills seemed to be radiating heat. There was no way he could gallop in this heat. He'd have to ride slowly, winding his way through the hills and avoiding the really high mountains.

That mountain peak in the distance seemed a little familiar. He thought he had seen it last year—its top was flat with two horns jutting out on either side. Sadashiv kept his eyes on that peak and rode on. He needed to find that huge berry tree by the river in that tiny valley to find his way to his village.

There was no one around, not even a sheep or cow. He had no idea how far away his village was, and how he would find his way to it.

As he descended into one of the many valley, he found a waterfall, unlike most around, that had not completely dried up in the heat. Sadashiv dismounted and both he and the horse drank their fill. They shared some of the rotis left over from the previous night and rode on.

As the sun started to lean to the west, Sadashiv spotted a few huts by a little stream that flowed through a narrow valley between two steep mountains. He was thrilled to have found a village where he could ask for directions to Dongarhpur.

It is impossible to ride down a hillside on a straight road. One has to take zigzag, winding routes. Sadashiv and his horse climbed slowly down, looking for proper footholds so as to not fall down that steep gradient.

The road went down to a little hollow, which looked like a cave, and after that climbed slightly uphill to the village. As Sadashiv reached the hollow, the silence was suddenly shattered.

From the cave, five men stormed out with spears in their hands, shouting, 'Ho, ho, ho!' They surrounded Sadashiv's horse, who came to a plunging halt. One ordered harshly, 'That's it! If you dare to move a step, you're dead.'

The men were all heavily bearded and moustached, and their eyes were wild. Their worn clothes looked as if they had once been the uniforms of Mughal soldiers.

In those unsettled times, there were many soldiers who deserted their armies and took to looting unprotected villages and robbing travellers. These men were one such band.

Sadashiv realized that his life was in danger, but there was a curious lack of fear within him. His mind seemed to be working very fast. It would be impossible to win against the five men by sheer physical strength and so he realized he would have to act with caution. He made his voice tearful and asked tremblingly, 'What's this! Who are you?'

One dacoit snatched the sword from his waistband and another grabbed the reins from his hands. 'Dismount!' ordered

the man who had asked him to stop, who seemed to be their leader.

Sadashiv dismounted. One of the men unharnessed the horse and tied his forelegs with a rope. Then they went back to the cave, dragging Sadashiv behind them.

It was quite a large cave. About ten men could easily stay there. The floor was uneven and the roof was quite low. There was a crack in the wall at the back and a thin stream of water trickled out from it.

The dacoits made Sadashiv sit on the floor and settled down around him.

The leader looked at him with bloodshot eyes for a while. 'You don't seem to be too old, but you look like a soldier. Who do you fight for?' he snarled.

Sadashiv said, 'I was with the Bijapuris to start with; now I am not with anyone. I'm looking for work. Whose army are *you* in?'

One of them cackled with laughter. 'We're in the dacoit-army.'

Sadashiv looked as frightened as he could manage to. 'What! Dacoits! But I don't have anything on me, except for a few paise. Please let me go.'

The leader said, 'You have a horse, you have weapons; we can take those from you. But that won't be necessary. You are welcome to join our gang. We are now five and if we become six, we'll be stronger.'

Another man said, 'There used to be ten of us. But now there's only five left. We need more people in the gang.'

Sadashiv asked, 'Where are the other five?'

The man said, 'Some got caught and some died when we went out to loot.'

A third dacoit said, 'There's no difference between the life of a dacoit and that of a soldier—you may be a king one day and a pauper the next. We were once in the Mughal army—'

Sadashiv said, 'You were in the Mughal army! Then why did you quit?'

They laughed. The second dacoit said, 'We didn't want to quit. But we were forced to. In large armies there are quarrels among the soldiers, and knives and daggers are drawn. We killed four men.'

'Yes,' said the third dacoit bitterly, 'the prince ordered that we be killed. Then there was no other way but to quit the army. Since then we have lived by robbery. We are quite happy, really. We don't take orders from anyone and whatever we get from looting is divided equally among all of us.'

All this while, the leader of the group had been staring at Sadashiv fixedly. He asked, 'Will you join our gang? You'll get a share of the loot as well.'

Sadashiv realized that if he refused outright, they'd probably kill him. He said sorrowfully, 'I would love to join your gang. But you see, I am going to my village right now. My mother is very sick; she doesn't have long to live and that's why I'm going to see her. I'll just see her and come back from the village. Then I'll join your gang, okay? Will you be right here?'

The leader's eyes were very shrewd as he looked at Sadashiv. 'Although you are young, you seem to be quite bright. But that wit won't work here. If you don't listen to us, we can take your horse and even your life. But that won't serve our

purpose. We are five and one horse will be of no use to us. Now listen to me carefully. We can let you go on one condition, *and* you'll get back your horse and your weapons.'

Faintly, Sadashiv asked, 'What condition?'

The leader said, 'We haven't had anything to eat since yesterday. You will have to get some food for us.'

'Food! From where?'

'From that village,' the leader pointed to the village across the valley.

Sadashiv looked at him in amazement. 'But—but you are all dacoits. Why don't you go and rob some food from that village?'

The leader smiled a little. 'Do you think we haven't tried that? But it didn't work out. About a month ago we'd gone and looted that village. Since then they have also taken precautions and they're ready with spades and shovels. The moment we enter, they'll cut us into bits. We are five and they are fifty.'

'Then?'

The leader said, 'You are a Maratha. If you go to the village and want to buy some food, they'll surely sell it to you. Do you have money?'

Sadashiv fished out a handful of paise from his waistband. 'This is all I have.' He didn't mention the gold ring inside his shirt.

The leader said, 'Go to the village and buy a goat.'

Another dacoit said, 'Yes, a nice, fat goat. It's been so long since we had any meat—only chewing on dry gram and corn all these days!'

The leader said, 'Now even that is over. Go on, buy a goat and come back quickly. Your horse and weapons are in our

custody. If you don't come back—'

Sadashiv said, 'I'll come back.'

The sun had already leaned far towards the mountain peaks in the western sky when Sadashiv came out of the cave and began to climb up towards the valley. The horse snorted as he went by, but his legs were tied and he could not move.

As Sadashiv began to walk towards the village, he saw a large group of men—about forty or more—advance towards him, carrying sticks, spades, shovels and scythes. On seeing Sadashiv, they fanned across the path to bar his way and came forward threateningly.

As soon as he was within shouting distance, a stout man called out in a deep voice, 'Halt! Who are you? What do you want?'

Sadashiv stopped and raised his hands in the air to show he was unarmed. 'Don't be afraid, I don't have any weapons. I'm a Maratha. I want to speak to you.'

The man said, 'Tell us who you are and where you are coming from.'

'My name is Sadashiv. I was on my way to Dongarhpur from Chakon fort when some Mughal dacoits nabbed me on these mountains and seized my horse and weapons.'

The men in front conferred briefly. 'All right, you may come closer.'

As Sadashiv reached them, the villagers pelted him with many questions. The stout man, who was called Maruti and was the blacksmith, seemed to be one of the leaders.

Maruti moved everyone aside, raised his hand and said, 'Keep quiet, all of you. Let me ask him what we want to know. You

are a Maratha. How is it that the dacoits let you go?'

As Sadashiv narrated the story, Maruti interrupted him to exclaim, 'They are just five! A month ago when they attacked our village, there was more of them. They stole cattle and goats from the sheds and even attacked the moneylender's stash. Since then they are hovering around in these mountains. But we are also prepared. If they come here again, we'll hack them to pieces.'

Sadashiv said, 'They are also clever; they won't come this way easily. But they are also very hungry. That's why they have sent me.'

Maruti said, 'Hmm. Well, how about if all of us gang up and attack them in their cave? How will that be?'

Sadashiv said, 'If they see the whole village advancing on them, they'll just leave the cave and run away. You won't be able to kill them.'

Maruti shook his head. 'That's no good. It's important to finish them. How long are we going to stay up nights fearing another attack? If they run away, they'll come back, or they'll go and create trouble in some other village.'

Sadashiv thought for a while and said, 'I have an idea.'

'What is it? What idea?'

'Do you have the sap of poppy seeds in your village?'

'Sap of poppy seeds? You mean, opium? Of course, we have it, all the old men have it all the time.'

'Give me a goat. Feed the goat lots of opium and let me take it back to the dacoits. They are terribly hungry and so they'll cut up the goat and eat it up immediately. Then—'

Maruti exclaimed excitedly, 'That is a brilliant idea! Come

with me, I'll get you a goat from the shed. Hey, Venkat, run and fetch a fair-sized ball of opium from your grandfather.'

As they trooped back to the village, Sadashiv said, 'I would also like you to give me some gram. All my food is over too.'

After a while, Sadashiv left the village, dragging behind him a goat on a rope. The goat was prancing along. The first effect of opium is a burst of energy and then one gradually dozes off. Sadashiv felt very sad for the frisky goat. Poor thing, it had no idea that the dacoits would cut it up very soon and eat it.

The sun had nearly set by the time Sadashiv and the goat reached the cave. The dacoits rushed up to them, whooping with joy. One took out his sword and chopped off the goat's head. Supervised by the leader, the four dacoits began to skin it.

Sadashiv went up to the leader and said in a humble tone, 'Chief, I have done what you asked me to do. Now may I leave?'

The leader placed his hand on Sadashiv's shoulder and said sardonically, 'How can you go so soon? Can't you see, it's almost dark? You must stay here tonight and we will take a decision tomorrow morning.'

Sadashiv realized with a sinking heart that they did not want to let him go. He didn't say anything. He had been hoping they would let him leave, so that he could spend the night in Maruti's village and set off to Dongarhpur in the morning. He walked up to the front of the cave, sat down and began to observe the dacoits.

The dacoits brought some firewood and lit a fire. They speared big chunks of meat on their spears, roasted them over

the fire, and bit into them with cries of relish. But even amidst all this, they still kept a vigilant eye on Sadashiv. There was no way that he could quietly slip away on his horse.

Sadashiv began to munch on the dry gram seeds as the dacoits feasted. Between the five of them, they finished the entire goat. Then they burped contentedly and began to play dice beside the fire.

Sadashiv tried to hear what their conversation as they gambled. He gathered that the horse was the stake. They had decided that the horse was now their property, and were trying to decide who among the five would own it.

Sadashiv's heart was beating hard. What would he do if the plan didn't work? Just that little bit of opium in such a large goat's stomach. How much of it would be absorbed in the flesh and blood of that goat? And how much of it would have gone into the bloodstream of five such huge dacoits?

The night wore on. It was pitch-black outside the cave. Within, by the roaring fire, the dacoits were engrossed in their game. All was silent, except for the occasional shout from by the fire, the sound of the horse striking the ground with his hooves once in a while, and once, the distant howl of a pack of fox.

Suddenly, the leader of the group raised his hands above his head, gave a huge yawn and spoke in a slurred voice, 'I have won and the horse is mine.'

The other dacoits also yawned. Then they stretched out wherever they were and went to sleep. They seemed to have forgotten all about Sadashiv, who waited silently, watching to see what would happen next.

In a little while, the five began to snore. Sadashiv had never heard anyone snore like that! The sound echoed through the cave like a drum roll.

The opium had worked!

Sadashiv's first impulse was to take the horse and make his escape at that very moment. But then better sense prevailed. It was pitch-black all around. If he tried to travel in the mountains in the dark on horseback, he could fall and break a limb, if not his neck!

He tiptoed into the cave, past the oblivious men, and collected his weapons. He put them by the entrance. He fed a handful of gram to his horse, and then sat down again in his old place to wait out the night.

Far, far away, the stars were moving slowly from east to west. The fire died down. Except for the snoring of the dacoits, there wasn't a sound anywhere. Sadashiv leaned back against the cave, his eyelids drooping despite himself.

When he looked next, the eastern sky was bright with light. He glanced quickly at the dacoits, then exhaled in relief. They had not moved an inch.

Sadashiv unsheathed his sword and tiptoed towards them. They lay at the odd angles they had fallen asleep in. Their breathing was deep and noisy. There was no fear of their waking up suddenly—this drugged stupor would last for many hours yet.

Sadashiv untied his horse, harnessed it and mounted it. Suddenly, his mind felt light and free. There was nothing to fear now. A great hurdle had been crossed. Jai Bhawani!

When Sadashiv reached the village, dawn was about to break.

Maruti and the other villagers surrounded him, clamouring for news.

Sadashiv got off his horse and said, 'The news is good. The dacoits are sleeping like the dead. You can get them safely now. They are in the cave by the hollow.'

Everyone shouted for joy. Maruti and a large group set off, armed with shovels, spades and scythes. The other villagers took good care of Sadashiv. He asked them for directions to Dongarhpur.

One middle-aged man knew the way. 'It's very far; even on horseback,' he said. 'I think you will get there at about three in the afternoon.'

Sadashiv took their leave and mounted his horse.

Sadashiv's horse galloped like a meteor through the fiery rays of the afternoon sun. There was only one thought in Sadashiv's mind: he had to reach Dongarhpur before nightfall. Tonight was Kunku's wedding, and he had to stop it by whatever means.

It was almost three, thought Sadashiv, looking up at the sky, but there was no sign of the village. He had lost his way and it had taken a while to get back to the right path. There were no real roads in the mountains. He had to go by signs and markers, and by his memories.

As the rays of the sun grew mild, Sadashiv spotted the course of a dry riverbed. He recognized it immediately! There was that enormous peepul tree. He had played under it so often as a child. This wasn't very far from the village—hardly a few miles to go! He spurred on his horse.

He drew rein suddenly. He could hear drums and trumpets

ahead—it was the groom's party! Those scoundrels had arrived. Around the bend ahead, he could see the scrawny horse of Bapurao dawdling away. They were moving quite slowly, but they'd reach the village soon.

Sadashiv thought for a moment. It was best not to bump into the groom's party again. Instead, he would ride through the jackfruit forest. It would be a slightly longer route, but if he galloped fast, he was bound to get there before them.

Sadashiv turned his horse to the left and rode into the forest.

The village was just as it had been a year ago—nothing had changed. The little huts stood around the *angan*, which was as big as a meadow. A huge banyan tree stood in the middle of that courtyard, and beside that stood the only brick building in the village: the treasury. In that brick building, the landlord's share of grain was stored after the harvest when his men came to collect taxes from all the villages. Later, Shivaji banished many of these bloodthirsty landlords, who collected taxes cruelly and lived like kings.

Sadashiv's horse crossed the courtyard and came to a halt in front of Vithhal Patil's hut. On both sides of the doorway stood banana plants. Mango leaves were strung up above the door. But there was no music or clamour in the house.

Sadashiv called out, 'Vithhal Patil! O Vithhal Patil!'

Vithhal Patil opened the door and came out. When he saw Sadashiv, he stopped short in surprise. At first he didn't recognize this boy dressed in a soldier's finery; but when he did, his eyes turned red with anger. He advanced screaming, 'Sadashiv? How dare you step into the village again!'

Hearing Patil's screams, the other villagers left their huts

and came towards them. Sadashiv caught a glimpse of Kunku's scared face behind the door of Patil's house.

Eagerly, he said, 'Vithhal Patil, first listen to what I have to say.'

Vithhal Patil screamed even louder. 'Why should I listen to you! Dressed up as a soldier you have come to speak to me!'

The villagers had surrounded Sadashiv and his horse. Patil said to them, 'Look, all of you take a look. Can't you recognize him? It is that scoundrel Sadashiv who stole my horse and ran away. Now he has stolen someone else's horse and come back here.'

Desperate, Sadashiv said, 'Yes, I *am* Sadashiv. But please listen to me for a minute. You have arranged to marry Kunku off to the old moneylender Bapurao of Chakon village. He is a rascal. He has poisoned his first wife! If you marry Kunku off to him, he'll poison her as well.'

For a few seconds, Vithhal Patil was dumbfounded. Then he burst forth like a barrel of gunpowder, 'How dare you, rascal, scoundrel! You stole my horse and escaped and now you have come back to stop my daughter's wedding! Wait, I'll take care of you.'

Patil pointed at Sadashiv's uncle, Sakharam, who was standing among the gathered villagers, a look of alarm on his face. 'Look here, Sakharam, look at what your nephew is up to. I am marrying my daughter into a rich household and so all of you are jealous.'

Sakharam turned away. 'Why are you telling *me* all this, Patil? Sadashiv may be my nephew, but I have disowned him. If you

want to punish him, you are most welcome,' he said as he walked away.

Patil said, 'Of course, I'll punish him. Catch him, all of you. Tonight I'll keep him locked up in the treasury and tomorrow I'll present him at the landlord's court. The punishment for theft is that your hands are cut off. Catch him, grab that boy or he'll run away right now.'

Sadashiv looked on in bemused surprise. What was all this! Here he was, running across mountains and rivers to come and save Kunku from a horrible fate and here was Kunku's father, who wanted to chop his hands off! Why was his good deed causing such rage? He could not think of a word to say in protest.

The villagers, eager to take revenge on a boy who had always angered them, forced Sadashiv off the horse.

'Tie up his hands and legs with a strong rope,' ordered Patil. 'I'll go and get the lock. We will lock him up in the treasury!'

Sadashiv didn't speak a word. What was the use? Vithhal Patil was so angry that he wouldn't listen to anything. He saw Kunku standing at the door, looking at him with concern and anxiety.

Sadashiv's hands and legs were tied up and he was dragged to the treasury. The doors were very strongly built and there were two big iron hoops on it. The room was empty since there were no crops at that time of the year.

Vithhal Patil shoved Sadashiv into the room and banged the door shut. 'Once Kunku gets married tonight, I'll drag the boy to the *mirasdar* in the morning,' he gloated.

As Patil turned the key in the lock, they heard the sounds of trumpets and drums in the distance.

'It's the groom, it's the groom!' Sadashiv could hear the clamour through the door, and then the sound of feet running in that direction.

Patil thrust the key in his pocket and went away to receive the groom at the outskirts of the village to welcome him properly.

It was pitch-black inside the treasury. There were no windows—just that one door. Sadashiv stood in the dark and resolved to keep his wits about him. He had been in worse situations, he told himself.

He began to bang the door with his bound hands. 'Open the door. I am a soldier in Shivaji's army and if you capture me, you'll be in trouble.'

But there was no sound from the other side. After a while, he stopped.

Sadashiv used his teeth to untie the knots on the ropes binding his wrists. Then he untied his ankles. He sat on the floor wondering what he could do next. If he stayed locked up all night, that old murderous scoundrel would end up marrying Kunku—no, no, that couldn't be allowed.

Sadashiv couldn't sit still any longer. His calm resolve deserted him. He jumped up. He was soaked with sweat. He felt stifled, as there was no air in the room. What if he died of suffocation? What if he could not save Kunku?

There was a sudden grating sound at the door. Someone seemed to be turning the key in the lock extremely cautiously.

Sadashiv held his breath and waited. He could knock out whoever it was and make a dash . . .

The door opened slowly, inch by inch. In the faint light of

dusk, Sadashiv saw Kunku standing there.

Kunku!

Sadashiv took her hand. She looked just like before—she hadn't changed one bit. But her clothes were rumpled and her hair dishevelled.

In hushed tones, Kunku said, 'Hurry, hurry. There's no time to talk. I have brought your horse. Quick, get up on it.'

The horse stood by the treasury. Sadashiv said, 'Kunku, your father has arranged your marriage to an old—'

'There's no time to talk. Get on to your horse first.'

'And you?'

'I'll come with you. But you must mount your horse first.'

Sadashiv looked at her, thrilled and amazed. Then, with bated breath, he asked, 'You—you'll run away with me?'

Kunku said, 'Yes, but please don't waste any more time. I have run away from home without telling anyone. I stole the key from Father's pocket. If he comes to know, he'll immediately send out a search party.'

Sadashiv felt like laughing out loud in joy. But he stopped himself and mounted the horse in one swift motion. Then he lifted Kunku up behind him.

On the other side of the village, they could hear the music played by the wedding band. Bapurao had arrived with due ceremony.

Sadashiv asked, 'Which way do we go?'

Kunku said, 'Follow the riverbed; that way no one will notice us. Once it's night, there'll be no need to worry any more.'

Sadashiv loosened the horse's reins and galloped away. Kunku held on to him tightly.

The dry riverbed was strewn with pebbles. The horse ran cautiously over these. The sky was brilliant with stars and their faint glow lit the way for the two travellers. They went past the huge *ashwath* tree by the river, and into the jackfruit forest.

After two or three miles, the horse stopped suddenly, lifted its head and snorted through its nose.

Sadashiv said, 'Perhaps there's water somewhere close by. The poor thing is thirsty.'

He shook the reins ever so slightly and the horse moved to the side. In a crevice in the hillside, some water had gathered. The horse lowered its head and began to drink.

Sadashiv dismounted and helped Kunku to get down. Both of them filled their palms with water and quenched their thirst. Then they sat down on the ground, face to face. They would move on once the horse had rested a while. In the faint starlight, each could see the other dimly.

Sadashiv said, 'Kunku, I am terribly hungry, you know. Water hardly fills your stomach. Aren't you hungry?'

Kunku said, 'I am. I didn't have anything to eat all day.'

Sadashiv said, 'Oh, you were fasting for the wedding. Poor thing! Such a wonderful opportunity slipped away. Don't worry; once we reach Poona, I'll hand you over to Jija-ma and she will see to it that you have a very good husband.'

Kunku was silent. There was a slight chill in the breeze as the hour grew late.

Suddenly Sadashiv said, 'Oh, I forgot to tell you something. When I went to Bijapur a few months ago, I bought something for you.'

Kunku said, 'So you remembered me?'

Surprised, Sadashiv said, 'Why should I forget you?'

Kunku didn't answer the question. Instead she said, 'What did you bring for me?'

'A gold ring. Here it is. I came all the way home to give you this ring.' Sadashiv took the ring out from under his shirt and gave it to Kunku. She put it on her finger.

'Does it fit?'

'Yes.'

For a while both were silent. The horse snorted once again.

'Kunku, can you smell it?'

Kunku said, 'Yes. It's the smell of ripe jackfruits.'

Sadashiv jumped up and said, 'There must be some fruits ripening close by. Come, let's go and find them. Jai Bhawani!'

They climbed up the riverbank and, hand in hand, followed the smell. They didn't have to go too far. There was a large jackfruit tree; near the bottom of its trunk, two ripe jackfruits hung low, emitting a heady odour.

They plucked off one fruit.

Sadashiv said, 'Thank goodness the foxes didn't get here first or they'd have finished everything.'

They got down to the riverbed again and broke open the fruit. It was a good one. Both of them ate to their heart's content and gave the leftovers to the horse.

Once they were replete, Sadashiv stood up and said, 'Come on, we shouldn't stay here any longer. The farther we go from the village, the better it is.'

Kunku said, 'All right. But wouldn't it be better if we took the second jackfruit with us?'

'You're right. We'll get hungry again tomorrow.'

They went back to pluck the second fruit. This was not as big as the first one. Sadashiv bundled it up in the cloth of his headgear and slung it over the back of the horse. Then they mounted the horse again and set off.

The horse cantered cautiously in the dark. Kunku and Sadashiv didn't mind the pace, they could not talk if the horse moved much faster. There was so much to talk about, so much news to exchange. Sadashiv told her about everything that happened to him since he left the village. As she heard, sometimes Kunku's heart beat faster and sometimes a smile tugged at her lips.

In turn, Kunku told him stories about the village—simple tales, but Sadashiv enjoyed hearing them all.

Thus the night passed. As daylight broke, they could see they had come a long way from the village. There was no longer any fear of getting caught.

Sadashiv looked at the landscape to choose his route. If he went across the valley past that peak towards the south, he should reach Chakon fort by noon of the following day. Shivaji had asked him to stop by Chakon fort on his way back. He would do so, even though he now had an unexpected companion for the journey.

He told to Kunku, 'We will ride during the day until the sun gets too hot. In the afternoon, we'll rest in some cave or under some tree; then we'll go on again in the evening until dark. What do you think?'

'Yes, that sounds fine.'

The horse galloped on, seemingly untroubled by its double load.

In the afternoon, they found a cave tucked away in the hillside. There they ate the jackfruit and slept through the afternoon. In the evening, when the sun grew milder, they went on their way again.

Dusk fell and a thin sliver of a moon rose in the sky. After riding along by the dim light of that moon for some time, they reached a valley. There were some large trees there and they decided to spend the night there.

They let the horse graze and they climbed a large tree. The night passed swiftly in conversation and snatches of sleep. At dawn, they set off again.

They reached Chakon fort a little before noon. In the bright sunlight the stone fort glittered brightly. Armed soldiers stood on guard in front of the open gates. In the nearby hamlet, Sadashiv could see people at work. Perhaps Sahasrabudhhi was with them.

Sadashiv reined his horse in the shade of a tree. He said to Kunku, 'You wait behind this tree, Kunku. Let me check out the fort. Don't be afraid, I'll be right back.'

She sat down under the tree as Sadashiv sped away on his horse.

There were five guards at the gates. They were not the same ones as before.

Sadashiv halted in front of them and said, 'I had come a few days ago in search of work. At that time ! couldn't see the owner of the fort. Could I see him today?'

The guards laughed out loud.

Shivaji came out from the fort, laughing. 'Hello there, you are back very soon!'

Sadashiv gaped in astonishment. Recovering a bit, he jumped off his horse. 'Shibba Rao, you are here?'

Shivaji placed his hand on Sadashiv's shoulder. 'I seized the fort last night.'

'Seized it! So there was a battle?'

'There was no need for a battle.'

'Then how did you seize it, Shibba Rao?'

'Very simple. I had sent a letter to Firangji via you. You handed it to him very cleverly. The fiery trishul! I have heard all about it from Firangji.' Shivaji clapped him on the back approvingly.

'Then?'

'In that letter I had written that Firangji should leave his window open at night and hang a rope from it. That's exactly what Firangji did. In the dead of night, fifty soldiers and I climbed into Firangji's room, one by one. There was nothing to it after that. When they found we had already entered the fort, they surrendered. Not a drop of blood was shed. The fort was seized.'

Sadashiv gazed in elated wonder.

Shivaji said, 'Now tell me your news. Did Patil get you?'

Sadashiv laughed. 'He did. That's a long story. Shibba Rao, I have brought something from the village. Do you want to see?'

'What have you brought?'

'Just a minute,' Sadashiv mounted his horse and rushed away. In a little while, he walked back to Shivaji, holding the horse's reins in one hand and Kunku's hand in the other.

Astounded, Shivaji said, 'What's this? Where did you find this girl?'

Sadashiv said, 'She is Kunku, the daughter of Vithhal Patil.

Her father was marrying her off to an old moneylender. So she ran away with me.'

Kunku stood there, looking down at her feet shyly.

Shivaji burst out into loud laughter, 'What kind of a boy are you! The first time you ran away with Patil's horse and this time you stole his daughter! Now what will you do with her? She is not a horse that you can keep her tied in the stable.'

Sadashiv said, 'I'll ask Jija-ma to look after her.'

Shivaji said, 'That's not a bad idea. Ma is in Poona. Why don't you go on to Poona? Have lunch here, and then start right away. You should reach Poona before dusk. I'll return tomorrow after taking care of everything here.'

Sadashiv said, 'Won't there be a battle here?'

Shivaji laughed and said, 'Don't worry, I won't go to a battle without you. There won't be any more battles this year before the rains. Come on both of you, come inside.'

When they were inside, Shivaji called out to a man. As he came over, Shivaji pointed at Sadashiv and asked, 'Do you recognize him?'

The man was sturdily built and bearded, and looked to be about forty. He looked at Sadashiv for a while, shook his head and said, 'I don't know him.'

Shivaji looked at Sadashiv and asked, 'Do *you* recognize him?'

Sadashiv laughed. 'I didn't recognize him by face but I know that voice—Firangji Narsala.'

Shivaji said, 'Firangji, this is Sadashiv—the one who lit the fiery trishul.'

'What!' Firangji came and embraced Sadashiv. 'Such a little boy! I didn't see your face in the dark that night.'

Sadashiv said, 'Neither did I.'

Shivaji said, 'But the work got done.'

Shivaji sat down to lunch along with Sadashiv. Firangji's wife took Kunku's hand and led her into their room.

Sadashiv narrated the stories of his journey to Shivaji as they ate. When he heard about the dacoits, Shivaji said, 'There is great unrest in the whole of Maharashtra. Unless we can conquer all the land, it's impossible to end it.'

Firangji said, 'People have pinned their hopes on you. They are waiting for you to become the king and to bring peace and prosperity to the land.'

Shivaji looked absently into the distance for a while and then spoke slowly, 'That won't be for a long time yet, Firangji.'

The afternoon passed. Sadashiv mounted a new, brisk horse and helped Kunku on behind him. Shivaji sent two armed guards with them to escort them to Poona.

As they left the gates of the fort, Sadashiv found Sahasrabudhhi standing there. When he saw Sadashiv, his smile stretched from one ear to the other. He said, 'Ha, ha, ha, I see that you have returned. Who is that with you?'

Sadashiv said, 'She is from my village. What's the news in your village? Has the moneylender married and returned?'

Sahasrabudhhi said, 'Not yet. He has to get his bride.'

Sadashiv said, 'What bride? She has run away.'

'What! Where has she gone?'

'Right here, with me.' Sadashiv laughed as he sped away.

Sahasrabudhhi stood there open-mouthed for some time. Then he rushed away towards the village. He could hardly wait to pass on this choice bit of news to all the people in the village.

Sadashiv and Kunku reached Poona just before sunset. Jijabai was in her mansion.

She cried out in joy at seeing Sadashiv. 'You're back at last! Do you have any news of Chakon fort?'

'I do, Jija-ma. I'm coming from there right now. Shibba Rao has seized the fort without a single drop of blood being shed. He will return tomorrow.'

Jijabai heaved a sigh of relief. She smiled and seemed to notice Kunku for the first time.

Sadashiv took Kunku's hand and led her forward. 'Jija-ma, I have brought you a companion from my village. Her name is Kunku—I have told you about her. Her father was marrying her off to an old moneylender and so she ran away with me.'

Jijabai held out her hands to Kunku. 'You have a very sweet face. Will you stay with me?'

With tearful eyes, Kunku said, 'I will.'

Sadashiv said eagerly, 'Jija-ma, her wedding was ruined, you see. Will you look out for a good boy and get her married? The boy has to be *very* good.'

Jijabai said, 'You don't worry about that. I'll get her married to a very good boy indeed.' She looked at the two of them and smiled to herself.

PART V

THE HORSE TRADER

CHAPTER ONE

Sadashiv was very smart, but he didn't have an ounce of arrogance in him. He always thought more about others than about himself. In fact, he never thought of himself as particularly smart or brave. That was one of the reasons why everyone, including Shivaji, was so fond of him.

Though everyone was very happy that Shivaji had seized Chakon fort, in his long struggle to set up a Maratha kingdom this victory wasn't such a big achievement. There were hundreds of forts in all of Maharashtra: some under the Mughals, some under the Bijapuris and many were independent. Shivaji's goal was to conquer all the forts in Maharashtra, bring them under

his rule and establish an empire. All the Marathas would then be united and free of foreign rule. This was not an easy task and neither could it happen in a short time. Shivaji seized many forts, one after another, sometimes by waging a war and sometimes by sheer guile. But there were still many forts left to be conquered.

As one of Shivaji's bodyguards, Sadashiv was always by Shivaji's side. Apart from the fact that he had saved Kunku, Sadashiv had another reason to be very happy. He used to be a little downcast because he didn't have a moustache. It was a shame not to have a moustache when one went to the battlefield to fight. But now at last, a crisp moustache had just grown under his nose. No one made fun of him as a boy any more; he was now a brave young man, a true warrior.

It was at this time that a great calamity struck the land of the Marathas. An epidemic killed nearly half the horses. And horses were very important for battles and also to navigate the mountainous land.

This posed a big problem for Shivaji. Between the soldiers in his army and his own stock, Shivaji had around five thousand horses. But most of them died in the epidemic. How was he to fight against the enemy?

The only positive thing was that his enemies had also lost many horses. Everyone thus had the same problem, and no one was able to win on that account. All the different armies were trying desperately to get hold of more horses. But there were hardly any horses around. The horse traders, who came from other countries to sell horses, were terrified of the epidemic and stayed away.

In all Maharashtra, there was only one man who had many horses. This was Balwant Rao, the owner of Chandragarh fort. Chandragarh wasn't very far from Poona—about a day's journey on horseback. But it was an arduous road winding through the Katraj Ghats, at the heart of which the fort lay nestled. It was perhaps because it was so remote that Chandragarh fort wasn't touched by the epidemic.

Balwant Rao was an old man, as shrewd as he was miserly. He was also related to Shivaji. Some six or seven years ago, he had come to Poona to meet his cousin, Jijabai. At the time Shivaji was a mere boy; but Balwant Rao understood that he was no ordinary person—one day he would reign over all of Maharashtra. He had smiled sweetly and said, 'Dear boy, I can see the signs of rulership in you. I pray to God that you succeed in ruling the land.'

Shivaji had been silent. Balwant Rao had patted him on the back and said, 'You are my cousin Jija's son, and you are very dear to me. But make sure that you never reach for my fort when you grow up.'

Shivaji had said humbly, 'No, no, that's out of the question.'

Jijabai had been present at this exchange. Balwant Rao had pointed to her feet and said, 'Touch your mother's feet and swear that you will never shed a drop of blood in trying to take over my fort.'

Unable to refuse, Shivaji had obeyed. He had touched his mother's feet and sworn that he would never try to take over Chandragarh fort. Satisfied, Balwant Rao had returned home.

This was history. The present reality was that Balwant Rao was sitting in his fort with two thousand horses, four times the

number of soldiers in his fort. Balwant Rao was happily selling his horses; since the epidemic he had even raised the price—each horse now cost ten gold coins!

Necessity breeds desperation. Those who were very desperate bought a few horses at that price, but there weren't many people around who could afford such a price.

Shivaji sent an emissary to Balwant Rao, but the old man was firm. He couldn't possibly lower the price for his nephew. That was unethical. If anyone wanted to buy a horse it would have to be for ten gold coins and nothing less.

Shivaji was in a fix. He couldn't break his promise. He could have easily conquered Chandragarh fort, but he would not. All he wanted were the horses. He began to hatch a plan to get hold of the horses from Balwant Rao without actually breaking his promise. The old man was not concerned about family loyalty; in times of trouble, he showed no signs of wanting to help Shivaji. Hence Shivaji resolved to teach the man a lesson.

One evening, Shivaji was lost in these thoughts when he went up to the terrace where Kunku was brushing Jijabai's hair.

Jijabai noticed Shivaji's preoccupied air and looked at him inquiringly. 'What is the matter?'

'Nothing, Ma. Just came up for a stroll.'

Jijabai didn't say anything more. Shivaji began to pace the floor with a worried frown. From the terrace one could see the township of Poona and the Mootha river far away. But Shivaji paid no attention to the view.

Jijabai was talking to Kunku. Shivaji, lost in thought, paid no attention to them either. As he wondered once again how he

could relieve his uncle of those horses, something Jijabai said sank in and he stopped short.

Jijabai continued serenely, 'On the next full moon day I will inaugurate my *vrata*, like a vow. I'll have to invite some Brahmins and feed them. It would have been nice if I could also invite some relatives, but we don't have too many of them in Poona . . .'

Shivaji stood still for a few minutes and then crept away quietly down the stairs. Sadashiv was standing at the foot of the stairs.

Shivaji said to him, 'Go and find Tanaji. We need to discuss something.'

Shivaji went into his secret conference room. It was a tiny room with a mattress on the floor and some cushions strewn around on it. Shivaji leaned on one of these and began to smile quietly to himself. He had hit upon a wonderful plan.

A little later, Sadashiv arrived there with Tanaji. Shivaji outlined his idea. 'The next full moon day is when Ma will inaugurate her vow. She is very sad that we don't have too many relatives here in Poona, so I have decided that I'll send an emissary to Chandragarh fort and invite my uncle Balwant Rao and all the men in his fort. There will be at least three to four hundred men there and they will all come on horseback. That means three to four hundred horses. Do you get me? They'll be here by noon and then the whole day will pass in the festivities. They won't be able to go back the same evening and so they'll spend the night here. The next morning Balwant Rao will wake up and find that all his horses are stolen! How's that?'

Tanaji slapped his knee in delight and said, 'Bravo! That's a fantastic idea. Even three to four hundred horses are a lot. Who are you sending as the emissary to invite them?'

Shivaji said, 'Sadashiv. Our priest will go with him.'

CHAPTER TWO

Shivaji said to Jijabai, 'Ma, this time we'll have a big celebration for the inauguration of your vow.'

Jijabai said, somewhat surprised, 'That's wonderful!'

Shivaji said, 'I'll invite all the men from Chandragarh fort. After all, Balwant Rao is your cousin and my uncle. It doesn't look nice if we don't invite him and his men.'

Jijabai laughed to herself and said, 'Very well. But see that you do not covet his fort. You have sworn at my feet not to do so.'

Shivaji shook his head emphatically. 'Oh, no, that'll be shameful.'

Sadashiv and the aged priest Ramdeo set off in a bullock cart in the early hours of the morning. They carried a sackful of betel nuts with them. It was customary to place a betel nut in a person's hand when formally inviting him.

It was five days before the full moon and there was a moon in the sky. Sadashiv drove the bullock cart. The reasons for going by cart and not on horseback were twofold. Though almost everyone in Maharashtra knew how to ride a horse, the priest was quite old and he wouldn't be comfortable on horseback for such a long distance. Secondly, it wasn't safe for two people to venture out on horseback. The times were unsafe anyway, and in the present crisis when horses had become the most valuable commodity in all Maharashtra, the chances of robbers snatching away their horses were high.

All night long, Sadashiv drove the bullock cart over undulating mountain roads, while Ramdeo slept. He stopped for a short while after the moon set and before the sun rose. But as soon as it was light again, they drove on. When they arrived at Chandragarh fort, it was about one in the afternoon.

The fort was ancient—perhaps four hundred years old—and huge. There was a twenty-foot-high wall made of big stone slabs all the way around it. Balwant Rao had preserved the fort well—he always replaced a stone slab if it was broken or chipped. Yet, there were creepers growing out of the crevices in the wall and the fort was showing all the signs of age.

Sadashiv looked around and muttered to himself, 'It'll be child's play for Shivaji to conquer this fort. But Shibba Rao has promised that he wouldn't.' He heaved a sigh of regret.

The main entrance to the fort was open. When Sadashiv's

bullock cart approached it, three sentries came forward and asked, 'What do you want?'

Ramdeo got down from the bullock cart. Sadashiv picked up the sack of betel nuts and stood beside him.

Ramdeo said, 'We have come from Poona. I am Shivaji's family priest. We'd like an audience with Balwant Rao, the owner of the fort.'

Everyone knew of Shivaji these days. The sentries looked at them with more respect. One said, 'Please wait a minute. I'll send word to the Rao.'

He went inside the fort. A little later, he returned and said, 'Please come inside.'

The sentries accompanied Ramdeo and Sadashiv into the fort.

Inside the fort, there was a platform on which a mattress was spread. Balwant Rao was sitting there surrounded by a few of his followers. One man was fanning him with a huge fan made of palm leaves.

Balwant Rao's face looked like a brinjal that had been roasted and mashed up. His head was shaved clean. His eyes were very shrewd. He looked at Ramdeo with suspicion writ large on his face.

Ramdeo raised his hands and blessed him. Then he took five betel nuts from Sadashiv's sack, placed them before Balwant Rao. 'On the next full moon day, Jijabai will inaugurate her vow. You are her dear cousin. So she has invited you and all the men in your fort. She would be grateful if all of you come to Poona on that day, have a meal there and inaugurate her vow.'

Balwant Rao's turban was kept beside his seat. He picked it

up, placed it on his head and then accepted the betel nuts. It wasn't good manners to accept an invitation with an uncovered head. He looked at Ramdeo and smiled a little, 'Please have a seat.'

Ramdeo sat down beside the Rao's seat. Sadashiv stood by, holding the sack of betel nuts. He was the driver of the bullock cart and so no one asked him to sit down.

Balwant Rao sat there with caution in his eyes and a fake smile on his lips. He began to ask Ramdeo many questions, about everyone's general welfare and then about what the vow was all about, how long will it run, and who else was invited.

Ramdeo was a righteous priest and he knew nothing of the plot. He answered the questions simply.

Finally, Balwant Rao said, 'Well, well, Shibba seems to have gone to great lengths to inaugurate his mother's vow.'

Ramdeo said, 'You know what a devoted son Shivaji is. He is bound to celebrate his mother's vow with great pomp!'

'That's true, that's true.' Balwant Rao hesitated for a moment and then asked, 'What's the menu like?'

Ramdeo reeled off a long menu: Amba Maur rice, amti sambar kosambi, puranpuri, laddus, jalebis, dahi wadas, curd, milk and many more things.

Balwant Rao was a stingy man. For his own mother's funeral he had fed only five Brahmins. When he heard the list, his jaw dropped in amazement. 'Shivaji will spend so much for his mother's vow! There are at least five hundred soldiers in my fort alone. Is he going to feed everyone so well?'

Ramdeo laughed. 'Of course, he will. This is not a small matter. It's the inauguration of his mother's vow.'

In the meantime, many of the soldiers had gathered around them. When they heard the menu, their eyes gleamed. Their daily fare was jawar rotis and coriander leaf chutney. They were thrilled to hear that Shivaji had invited them and arranged for such a huge feast.

Ramdeo said, 'In that case, may I invite everyone formally?'

'Please do.' Balwant Rao said it with a smile but his heart was still ridden with doubts. He knew for a fact that Shivaji would not break his promise, but what could be on his mind? Surely there was a plot. Why else would he invite so many people to a feast!

Ramdeo got up. He started putting a betel nut in each man's hand and inviting him for the feast.

The fort was like a mini town inside—there were roads, markets and even a pond. To the north of the fort was the stable and beside it the cattle-shed. As Ramdeo went around inviting people, Sadashiv followed him carrying the sack of betel nuts.

Sadashiv looked around with a stupid, wonderstruck expression as if he had never seen anything like it before. No one was interested in him and he could carefully look at everything and wander off to gaze at the view from different parts of the wall.

By the time they finished inviting everyone, it was way past afternoon.

Ramdeo said to Balwant Rao, 'My work is done. I'll take my leave. Should I inform Jijabai that on the full moon day all of you will be in Poona for lunch?'

'Yes, yes, certainly.'

After the bullock cart left, Balwant Rao sat smiling to himself for a long time. After all, he was Shivaji's uncle. It wasn't easy for the nephew to fool the uncle. He had cottoned on to Shivaji's plan.

CHAPTER THREE

Sadashiv's bullock cart came back to the fort four nights before the full moon, as the moon was setting in the sky.

Shivaji had been waiting for them all night long. He said to Ramdeo, 'Why don't you go and rest? It must have been a tiring journey for you.'

Ramdeo left. Shivaji took Sadashiv into the conference room and, in the light of a lamp, asked him about every little detail. A smile lit his face. He said, 'Jai Bhawani! It looks like everything is working according to our plan. But you have stayed awake two nights and driven the bullock cart—go and have a long nap. From tomorrow all the arrangements will be under way.

There are just three days to go.'

The following day, there was a flurry of activities. Everyone was busy organizing all the details of the feast. All the rich and famous people of Poona had to be invited. There were about five thousand of Shivaji's soldiers in Poona who would be coming, as well as the five hundred from Chandragarh fort. About ten thousand people were invited.

In the huge kitchen of the mansion, massive arrangements were under way. Jijabai was very excited and happy, and busily supervised all the preparations. Kunku followed her around faithfully, helping her in every chore.

Shivaji had other concerns to attend to. In these times of festivities, the enemy got a chance to attack. Shivaji had many enemies and had to be extra wary. Under Jessaji's command, a few hundred sentries were patrolling all around Poona. The band of spies was asked to be extra vigilant. They had to make sure that there was no way that the enemy could attack without warning.

The three days flew and the day of the full moon arrived. All the arrangements were done, and now they could only await the guests. Shivaji was especially concerned about the visitors from Chandragarh. When would they arrive on horseback?

At around one in the afternoon, the guests from Poona began to arrive: Brahmins with shaven heads and turbans, Marathas with swords tucked into their waistbands and many others. Shivaji and his friends welcomed the guests, after which everyone went into the assembly hall and applied *attar*. The sound of many conversations filled the air, making the vast chamber echo and boom.

Shivaji had sent Sadashiv up to the terrace to look out for the visitors from Chandragarh. The minute he saw them coming from the Katraj Ghats, he was to go and inform Shivaji. Whenever he got the time, Shivaji also slipped up to the terrace impatiently and checked. But there was no sign of them yet.

The day wore on. One group of Brahmins sat down to eat. They ate so much that they could hardly move. Somehow they managed to get up, burping loudly, took their gifts and left. Other people sat down to eat, and still the food kept coming from the kitchen as if there was an endless supply.

But Shivaji was growing more and more tense. It was the middle of the afternoon and Balwant Rao hadn't yet arrived. If they had left on horseback at sunrise, they should have reached long ago. Had they decided not to come? If so, all his arrangement were in vain.

Another hour passed. Shivaji was trying to conceal his restlessness as he talked to the guests, when he saw Sadashiv tumbling down the stairs in a great hurry. The minute their eyes met, Sadashiv stopped.

Shivaji saw that Sadashiv's eyes were round with surprise and there was no smile on his face. He raised his brow in a silent question to which Sadashiv nodded and said yes. But his expression remained tense.

Shivaji slipped away from his guests. He went up to Sadashiv, lowered his voice and said, 'What is it?'

Sadashiv whispered, 'They are coming, but—'

'But what?'

'Please come and see it for yourself, Shibba Rao.'

Shivaji went up to the terrace with Sadashiv and looked

towards the Katraj Ghats. Balwant Rao was indeed coming to honour the invitation, but he wasn't coming on horseback. A long row of bullock carts was headed that way—perhaps a hundred in all.

Shivaji looked at Sadashiv despondently.

Sadashiv said, 'Shibba Rao, what do we do now?'

Shivaji said, 'Nothing! It's all a waste.' He went downstairs gloomily.

Sadashiv stood alone on the terrace and began to think, 'What an amazing man! He figured out the plot. But, isn't there any other way? We have to have those horses! Is there any other way?'

The row of bullock carts stopped in front of the palace, where Shivaji stood, smiling in welcome. Balwant Rao dismounted from the first cart and Shivaji bowed to touch his feet.

Balwant Rao grinned and said, 'May you have a long life, my son. I can see that you have gone to great lengths for your mother. You have invited a lot of people!'

Shivaji said, 'Well, yes. Have you brought everyone?'

Balwant Rao turned his hands up and said, 'How could I? I had to keep a hundred men behind to guard the fort.'

Shivaji said, 'So many men just to guard the fort?'

Balwant Rao said, 'I had to, my son. You see, you may have promised that you'll never attack my fort, but there are so many others . . .'

Shivaji smiled and said, 'That's true.'

The men embraced one another—both knew they had met their match.

Shivaji escorted his uncle and his men inside and made them

comfortable in the hall. They were welcomed with attar and roses. After a while, Balwant Rao and his men sat down to lunch. As course succeeded course, the men grew more animated. Shivaji was the perfect attentive host. No one could tell from his face what was going on in his mind.

The afternoon slipped towards evening. Downstairs, the hustle and bustle of the festivities continued. Sadashiv continued to sit still on the stairs by the terrace, his chin resting on his hands. He wasn't interested in what was going on; he was thinking furiously.

Sadashiv suddenly twitched once as if he was struck by a lightning flash or an idea. For a while, he continued to sit stiffly and then tiptoed downstairs, looking for Shivaji.

He found Shivaji in a quiet corner of the mansion. Softly, he said, 'Shibba Rao, I have an idea.'

Shivaji gave him a quick glance; then he took him by the hand and went up to the deserted terrace.

Sadashiv outlined his plan in a few terse sentences. Shivaji's eyes shone bright with enthusiasm. He stifled his excitement and said, 'But there are a hundred soldiers in the fort.'

Sadashiv said, 'Shibba Rao, just give me fifty men and I will do it.'

Shivaji placed both his hands on Sadashiv's shoulders and spoke with a tremor in his voice, 'If you can, Sadashiv, then—then I'll give you Kunku's hand in marriage.'

CHAPTER FOUR

It was almost dusk. Balwant Rao and his men had eaten so much that they felt lethargic. They decided to spend that night in Poona and then start early the following day.

In contrast to the post-prandial lethargy that was happening within the mansion, brisk, surreptious activity was taking place at the back, where none of the guests could notice what was happening.

Sadashiv rode up on horseback to the kitchen door. Shivaji slung two bags of food on either side of the horse's back. Sadashiv cantered off, as if he wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere.

After Sadashiv came another rider and Shivaji did the same

for him. He left. Then came another one. By the time the fifty-first rider had left, it was dark outside. If anyone had been standing on the terrace, they would have noticed a long line of riders going towards the Katraj Ghats. Their destination was Chandragarh fort.

In the eastern sky, the full moon came out from behind the mountains. The fifty-one horsemen said, 'Jai Bhawani!' and galloped away at full speed. The synchronized beat of the horses' hooves echoed off the mountains.

Sadashiv led the expedition. The task ahead of them was fraught with danger. The leader needed great courage and presence of mind. Sadashiv was trying to focus only on the mission ahead, but his heart leaped up from time to time as he remembered Shivaji's words, 'I'll give you Kunku's hand in marriage.'

What a strange man Shivaji was! How could he read people's minds? How did he know the thoughts that Sadashiv himself was unaware of?

Sadashiv's band halted behind a hillock about two hundred metres away from Chandragarh fort. The moon was in mid-sky and they could see clearly by the moonlight. The fort looked forlorn and silent—there was not a sound from within.

Sadashiv dismounted, as did the others. After a moment's quiet discussion with some of the men, Sadashiv ordered, 'Put all the bags of food on my horse and on ten others.'

The work was done silently. Sadashiv and ten other men mounted the laden horses and proceeded towards the main entrance of the fort. The other forty men hid behind the rocks.

The main gates were closed. Sadashiv and his band stood before

the gates. He lifted his head and shouted, 'Ho, gatekeeper, ho.'

A little later, a few heads peered from over the parapet and asked, 'Who are you?'

Sadashiv said, 'We are Shivaji's men and we've come from Poona.'

They asked, 'What do you want?'

Sadashiv said, 'Balwant Rao has been feasting in Poona. But a hundred of the invitees haven't come there. Shivaji has sent food for them. We have brought the food.'

There was a few moments' silence. Then there was another question from atop the gates, 'How many of you are there?'

'Eleven. Please open the gates.'

The heads disappeared. Perhaps the gatekeepers were conferring among themselves. A little later the heads reappeared, and they said, 'We have orders not to open the gates. We'll dangle some ropes. Please tie the bags of food to them.'

Sadashiv laughed. 'You're so scared! Fine, just throw down the ropes and we'll tie the bags to them.'

Some ropes swayed down from the gates; Sadashiv and his men tied the bags of food to those ropes. In a short span of time, the bags and the ropes were pulled up into the fort.

Sadashiv said, 'Okay, then, I'll be off. Since you didn't let us in, we'll go back to Poona right now.'

There was silence from the gates. Sadashiv and his band of men raised the echoes of horses' hooves on the mountain walls and left. The guards of the fort heard the sounds disappearing in the distance.

Sadashiv and his men went behind the hillock and joined the rest of the group. Sadashiv called all his men together. They

left their horses and gathered around him.

Sadashiv laid out the plan in front of them in great detail. He explained how it would be done and what each of them would have to do. In the light of the moon, fifty pairs of eyes shone bright with excitement. Jai Bhawani! This was the life.

They waited patiently. It still wasn't time for the action to begin.

An hour passed. It was silent all around. There were no sounds from the direction of the fort either. Every now and then a nocturnal bird flew overhead, making loud, raucous noises. A pack of foxes passed by the hillock. They came upon the men in hiding suddenly and howled as they ran away.

Two hours passed. The moon tipped to the other side of the fort and the fort's massive shadow began to grow longer.

When the fort's shadow lengthened enough to touch the tip of the hillock, Sadashiv stood up and signalled to his men. They all stood up, untied the long ropes from their horses' backs and tucked their swords safely in their waistbands.

Sadashiv said, 'I'm going on ahead. Follow me.'

One by one, they all vanished into the shadow of the fort. The horses remained standing by the hillock. In the thick darkness of the fort's shadow, even if someone looked out from the terrace, they wouldn't spot a thing.

Sadashiv led the men under the cover of the twenty-foot walls of the fort. When he had come to distribute the betel nuts, he had examined the layout of the fort in great detail. He knew what was on its walls at every point.

The protective wall was round as a wheel. As Sadashiv walked, he paused now and then to tilt his head and peer up. At

one spot he stopped. About fifteen feet from the ground, there were some trees growing in the crevices. They weren't huge trees, but they were rooted quite firmly to the wall.

The man who stood right behind Sadashiv was called Gajanan. Sadashiv spoke to him in whispers. Gajanan took the rope from his waistband and handed it to Sadashiv. Sadashiv twirled it and threw it upwards like a lasso. After two or three attempts the noose caught on to the tree trunk. He pulled it till the rope was taut and to make sure it was firmly secured.

'Jai Bhawani!' said Sadashiv under his breath. He held on to the rope and began to climb up the wall. The minute he reached the tree, Gajanan followed.

They clung to the tree trunk along the walls of the fort and had another whispered conversation. The edge of the wall wasn't far from there, but it was just out of their reach.

Gajanan was tall. He leaned against the wall, holding on to the tree while Sadashiv climbed onto his shoulders. He reached up very cautiously, but his fingers still could not reach the edge of the wall.

Very slowly and gingerly, Sadashiv climed on to Gajanan's head. Stretching his hand out, he found that the edge of the wall was now within reach. He extended his other arm up as well and gripped the wall firmly with both hands. With all the strength in his hands, Sadashiv heaved his body up until he was sitting on the wall.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sadashiv looked around carefully. He couldn't see anybody. He pricked up his ears; from the direction of the stable the sound of horses scraping their hooves was heard. There were no other sounds.

Sadashiv peered down and gestured to his men. He untied the rope from his waist and dangled it down to the ground.

In an astonishingly short while, all fifty-one men were perched on the wall of the fort. No one in the fort stirred or seemed to be aware of their presence.

The moon was waning. In a while, the eastern sky would begin to lighten.

Sadashiv said quietly, 'Wait here. Let me take a quick look around the fort.' He took out his sword from its scabbard and slunk into the dark, silent as a shadow.

The men sat still. In the fading light of the setting moon, it was hard to see that there were so many men sitting side by side on the wall. They looked more like a row of earthen pots lined up.

When the hundred men left to guard the fort had received Shivaji's gifts, they had been suspicious at first. Some wondered if Shivaji had poisoned the food. But finally they weren't able to control themselves. They hadn't eaten such good food in a long time. They started by tasting it bit by bit, and ended by finishing every morsel.

The food wasn't poisoned. But such a heavy meal made everyone feel sluggish. They stayed up talking languidly to one another for a while, but soon everyone fell asleep.

Sadashiv walked around the fort without finding anyone awake. When he came back, he gathered everyone close and said quietly, 'Everyone is sleeping. Most are asleep in their own huts; about thirty of them are sleeping on the raised platform in the centre of the courtyard. Gajanan, you and twenty of the men must go and stand guard on these men. If anyone wakes up, see that they don't scream. Tikaram, you take ten men and lock the huts from the outside so that they can't come out. I will take the rest of the men and open the main gates of the fort. Be careful. The work has to be done in absolute silence. Draw your swords and proceed.'

The three groups left with their swords drawn. No one spoke a word or made a sound.

Sadashiv reached the main gates with his group. Four guards were resting against it and sleeping. They had been awake until midnight; but since Shivaji's men had supposedly returned to Poona and there were no other enemies close at hand, they saw no point in staying awake.

In a matter of seconds, they were gagged and and their wrists and ankles bound. The poor men just looked on dazedly.

Sadashiv and his men began to open the main gates. The huge latch had to be unlocked and then the doors opened as silently as possible. If they made too much noise, the sleeping men would wake up. They managed to do the whole operation with very little noise.

One of the group sleeping on the platform woke up. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Immediately he felt the jab of a sword-tip on his chest. A voice whispered urgently in his ear, 'Quiet! If you say a word, you'll be dead.' The man stared blankly for a minute and then lay down quietly.

The huts were locked from outside without the people in them even knowing about it. It was only when they woke in the morning and tried to come out that they realized the doors were locked.

Sadashiv stationed five men at the open gates and took the rest towards the stable. Tikaram and his group also finished their first task and arrived at the stables. Now the real job would begin—leading the horses away.

The stable was under an immense canopy. In it were two thousand horses, left loose in the enclosed space. Some were sitting, some standing. When they saw the men, some made a fine neighing sound in their throats.

Shivaji's men set to work briskly. Sadashiv stood by, giving sharp instructions and keeping an eye on the whole operation. The others led the horses away—two for each man. They tied them outside the fort and came back for more.

It was impossible to do this in complete silence. One can't cover the sound of horses' hooves. The men sleeping on the open-air platform did wake up. But they didn't have a single weapon in hand and they were surrounded by Gajanan and his men, who stood looking grim with swords in hand. They could do nothing except sit back and watch.

When Sadashiv and his men finished leading the two thousand horses out of the fort, the eastern sky was bright with the first rays of the sun. They went back to the hillock and mounted their own horses. Then they began to lead the stolen horses back towards Poona.

Sadashiv felt an immense sense of joy. He had succeeded in the mission, and not betrayed Shivaji's trust in him. Shivaji's promise to Balwant Rao was unbroken. Not a drop of blood was shed and the fort had not been taken over. But the job was done. Jai Bhawani! Shivaji would surely be delighted to get the two thousand horses. And he, Kunku!

The sun rose in the sky as they rode. After a while, Sadashiv said to Gajanan, 'Uncle Balwant Rao must have started from Poona by now. He will return by this route; it won't be a good idea to bump into him. Come, let's take a different route.'

They left the straight road to Poona and turned left. The road wound its way through a narrow valley. It would take a little longer to reach Poona but at least there was no chance of running into Balwant Rao and his men, who would surely take

the straight road to his fort. For one moment, Sadashiv wished he could see Balwant Rao's face when he reached home and found what had happened.

CHAPTER SIX

Shivaji was pacing back and forth, alone on the terrace of the family mansion in Poona. His forehead was creased with concern. The day was almost over and there was still no sign of Sadashiv.

Tanaji joined him. He took a look at Shivaji's face and said, 'What are you worried about? Sadashiv is a bright boy and he won't come back without seeing that the job is done.'

Shivaji said, 'I know that too. So far he has never failed in any mission. But after all, he is a young boy . . .'

Jijabai came up to the terrace, accompanied by Kunku. Jijabai said, 'Where have you sent the boy! You said he'll be back by

afternoon and he's not yet come back.'

Shivaji said, 'If Sadashiv doesn't return before dusk, I'll have to go out with my troops.'

Lost in their worries, no one was looking towards the Katraj Ghats. Suddenly, Kunku turned in that direction, and pointed with an exclamation. The others turned to look.

A stream of horses was pouring out from the steep and narrow opening of the Katraj valley. From a distance, it looked like a huge flock of sheep.

Tanaji began to dance in joy. 'Two thousand horses, two thousand horses! Jai Bhawani!'

Shivaji exclaimed, 'He's done it! Sadashiv has done it! Ma, your little boy has put everyone to shame.'

He and Tanaji rushed towards the stairs. Suddenly, Shivaji stopped, turned around and said, 'Ma, I have arranged a match for Kunku. Ask her if she'll agree to marry Sadashiv.' He gave a little laugh and bounded down the stairs.

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